

ORLEY FARM

BY

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ORLEY FARM

CHAPTER I

MONKTON GRANGE

DURING these days Peregrine Orme—though he was in love up to his very chin, seriously in love, acknowledging this matter to himself openly, pulling his hair in the retirement of his bed-room, and resolving that he would do that which he had hitherto in life always been successful in doing—ask, namely, boldly for that he wanted sorely—Peregrine Orme, I say, though he was in this condition, did not in these days neglect his hunting. A proper attendance upon the proceedings of the H. H. was the only duty which he had hitherto undertaken in return for all that his grandfather had done for him, and I have no doubt that he conceived that he was doing a duty in going hither and thither about the county to their most distant meets. At this period of the present season it happened that Noningsby was more central to the proceedings of the hunt than The Cleeve, and therefore he was enabled to think that he was remaining away from home chiefly on business. On one point, however, he had stoutly come to a resolution. That question should be asked of Madeline Staveley before he returned to his grandfather's house.

And now had arrived a special hunting morning—special, because the meet was in some degree a show meet, appropriate for ladies, at a comfortable distance from Noningsby, and affording a chance of amusement to those who sat in carriages as well as to those on horseback. Monkton Grange was the well-known

name of the place, a name perhaps dearer to the ladies than to the gentlemen of the country, seeing that show meets do not always give the best sport. Monkton Grange is an old farm-house, now hardly used as such, having been left, as regards the habitation, in the hands of a head labourer; but it still possesses the marks of ancient respectability and even of grandeur. It is approached from the high road by a long double avenue of elms, which still stand in all their glory. The road itself has become narrow, and the space between the side row of trees is covered by soft turf, up which those coming to the meet love to gallop, trying the fresh mettle of their horses. And the old house itself is surrounded by a moat, dry indeed now for the most part, but nevertheless an evident moat, deep and well preserved, with a bridge over it which Fancy tells us must once have been a drawbridge. It is here, in front of the bridge, that the old hounds sit upon their haunches, resting quietly round the horses of the huntsmen, while the young dogs move about, and would wander if the whips allowed them—one of the fairest sights to my eyes that this fair country of ours can show. And here the sportsmen and ladies congregate by degrees, men from a distance in dog-carts generally arriving first, as being less able to calculate the time with accuracy. There is room here, too, in the open space for carriages, and there is one spot on which always stands old Lord Alston's chariot with the four posters; an ancient sportsman he, who still comes to some few favourite meets; and though Alston Court is but eight miles from the Grange, the post-horses always look as though they had been made to do their best, for his lordship likes to move fast even in his old age. He is a tall thin man,

bent much with age, and apparently too weak for much walking; he is dressed from head to foot in a sportsman's garb, with a broad stiffly starched coloured handkerchief tied rigidly round his neck. One would say that old as he is he has sacrificed in no way to comfort. It is with difficulty that he gets into his saddle, his servant holding his rein and stirrup and giving him perhaps some other slight assistance; but when he is there, there he will remain all day, and when his old blood warms he will gallop along the road with as much hot fervour as his grandson. An old friend he of Sir Peregrine's. "And why is not your grandfather here to-day?" he said on this occasion to young Orme. "Tell him from me that if he fails us in this way, I shall think he is getting old." Lord Alston was in truth five years older than Sir Peregrine, but Sir Peregrine at this time was thinking of other things.

And then a very tidy little modern carriage bustled up the road, a brougham made for a pair of horses, which was well known to all hunting men in these parts. It was very unpretending in its colour and harness; but no vehicle more appropriate to its purpose ever carried two thorough-going sportsmen day after day about the country. In this, as it pulled up under the head tree of the avenue, were seated the two Miss Tristrams. The two Miss Tristrams were well known to the Hamworth Hunt—I will not merely say as fearless riders,—of most girls who hunt as much can be said as that, but they were judicious horsewomen; they knew when to ride hard, and when hard riding, as regarded any necessary for the hunt, would be absolutely thrown away. They might be seen for half the day moving about the roads as leisurely, or standing as quietly at the covert's side as might the seniors of

the field. But when the time for riding did come, when the hounds were really running—when other young ladies had begun to go home—then the Miss Tristrams were always there;—there or thereabouts, as their admirers would warmly boast.

Nor did they commence their day's work as did other girls who came out on hunting mornings. With most such it is clear to see that the object is pretty much the same here as in the ballroom. "*Spectatum veniunt; veniunt spectentur ut ipsæ*," as it is proper, natural, and desirable that they should do. By that word "*spectatum*" I would wish to signify something more than the mere use of the eyes. Perhaps an occasional word dropped here and there into the ears of a cavalier may be included in it; and the "*spectentur*" also may include a word so received. But the Miss Tristrams came for hunting. Perhaps there might be a slight shade of affectation in the manner by which they would appear to come for that and that only. They would talk of nothing else, at any rate during the earlier portion of the day, when many listeners were by. They were also well instructed as to the country to be drawn, and usually had a word of import to say to the huntsman. They were good-looking, fair-haired girls, short in size, with bright grey eyes, and a short decisive mode of speaking. It must not be imagined that they were altogether indifferent to such matters as are dear to the hearts of other girls. They were not careless as to admiration, and if report spoke truth of them were willing enough to establish themselves in the world; but all their doings of that kind had a reference to their favourite amusement, and they would as soon have thought of flirting with men who did not hunt as some other girls would with men who did not dance.

I do not know that this kind of life had been altogether successful with them, or that their father had been right to permit it. He himself had formerly been a hunting man, but he had become fat and lazy, and the thing had dropped away from him. Occasionally he did come out with them, and when he did not do so some other senior of the field would have them nominally under charge; but practically they were as independent when going across the country as the young men who accompanied them. I have expressed a doubt whether this life was successful with them, and indeed such doubt was expressed by many of their neighbours. It had been said of each of them for the last three years that she was engaged, now to this man and then to that other; but neither this man nor that other had yet made good the assertion, and now people were beginning to say that no man was engaged to either of them. Hunting young ladies are very popular in the hunting-field; I know no place in which girls receive more worship and attention; but I am not sure but they may carry their enthusiasm too far for their own interests, let their horsemanship be as perfect as it may be.

The two girls on this occasion sat in their carriage till the groom brought up their horses, and then it was wonderful to see with what ease they placed themselves in their saddles. On such occasions they admitted no aid from the gentlemen around them, but each stepping for an instant on a servant's hand, settled herself in a moment on horseback. Nothing could be more perfect than the whole thing, but the wonder was that Mr. Tristram should have allowed it.

The party from Noningsby consisted of six or seven on horseback, besides those in the carriage. Among the

former there were the two young ladies, Miss Furnival and Miss Staveley, and our friends Felix Graham, Augustus Staveley, and Peregrine Orme. Felix Graham was not by custom a hunting man, as he possessed neither time nor money for such a pursuit; but to-day he was mounted on his friend Staveley's second horse, having expressed his determination to ride him as long as they two, the man and the horse, could remain together.

"I give you fair warning," Felix had said; "if I do not spare my own neck, you cannot expect me to spare your horse's legs."

"You may do your worst," Staveley had answered. "If you give him his head, and let him have his own way, he won't come to grief, whatever you may do."

On their road to Monkton Grange, which was but three miles from Noningsby, Peregrine Orme had ridden by the side of Miss Staveley, thinking more of her than of the affairs of the hunt, prominent as they were generally in his thoughts. How should he do it, and when, and in what way should he commence the deed? He had an idea that it might be better for him if he could engender some closer intimacy between himself and Madeline before he absolutely asked the fatal question; but the closer intimacy did not seem to produce itself readily. He had, in truth, known Madeline Staveley for many years, almost since they were children together; but lately, during these Christmas holidays especially, there had not been between them that close conversational alliance which so often facilitates such an overture as that which Peregrine was now desirous of making. And, worse again, he had seen that there was such close conversational alliance between Madeline and Felix Graham. He did

not on that account dislike the young barrister, or call him, even within his own breast, a snob or an ass. He knew well that he was neither the one nor the other; but he knew as well that he could be no fit match for Miss Staveley, and, to tell the truth, he did not suspect that either Graham or Miss Staveley would think of such a thing. It was not jealousy that tormented him, so much as a diffidence in his own resources. He made small attempts which did not succeed, and therefore he determined that he would at once make a grand attempt. He would create himself an opportunity before he left Noningsby, and would do it even to-day on horseback, if he could find sufficient opportunity. In taking a determined step like that, he knew that he would not lack the courage.

"Do you mean to ride to-day?" he said to Madeline, as they were approaching the bottom of the Grange avenue. For the last half-mile he had been thinking what he could say to her, and thinking in vain; and now, at the last moment, he could summon no words to his assistance more potent for his purpose than these.

"If you mean by riding, Mr. Orme, going across the fields with you and the Miss Tristrams, certainly not. I should come to grief, as you call it, at the first ditch."

"And that is just what I shall do," said Felix Graham, who was at her other side.

"Then, if you take my advice, you'll remain with us in the wood, and act as squire of dames. What on earth would Marian do if aught but good was to befall you?"

"Dear Marian! She gave me a special commission to bring her the fox's tail. Foxes' tales are just like ladies."

"Thank you, Mr. Graham. I've heard you make some pretty compliments, and that is about the prettiest."

"A faint heart will never win either the one or the other, Miss Staveley."

"Oh, ah, yes. That will do very well. Under these circumstances I will accept the comparison."

All of which very innocent conversation was overheard by Peregrine Orme, riding on the other side of Miss Staveley's horse. And why not? Neither Graham nor Miss Staveley had any objection. But how was it that he could not join in and take his share in it? He had made one little attempt at conversation, and that having failed he remained perfectly silent till they reached the large circle at the head of the avenue. "It's no use, this sort of thing," he said to himself. "I must do it at a blow, if I do it at all;" and then he rode away to the master of the hounds.

As our party arrived at the open space the Miss Tristrams were stepping out of their carriage, and they came up to shake hands with Miss Staveley.

"I am so glad to see you," said the eldest, "it is so nice to have some ladies out besides ourselves."

"Do keep up with us," said the second. "It's a very open country about here, and anybody can ride it." And then Miss Furnival was introduced to them. "Does your horse jump, Miss Furnival?"

"I really do not know," said Sophia; "but I sincerely trust that if he does, he will refrain to-day."

"Don't say so," said the eldest sportswoman. "If you'll only begin it will come as easy to you as going along the road;" and then, not being able to spare more of these idle moments, they both went off to their horses, walking as though their habits were no im-

pediments to them, and in half a minute they were seated.

"What is Harriet on to-day?" asked Staveley of a constant member of the hunt. Now Harriet was the eldest Miss Tristram.

"A little brown mare she got last week. That was a terrible brush we had on Friday. You weren't out, I think. We killed in the open, just at the edge of Rotherham Common. Harriet was one of the few that was up, and I don't think the chestnut horse will be the better of it this season."

"That was the horse she got from Griggs?"

"Yes; she gave a hundred and fifty for him; and I'm told he was as nearly done on Friday as any animal you ever put your eyes on. They say Harriet cried when she got home." Now the gentleman who was talking about Harriet on this occasion was one with whom she would no more have sat down to table than with her own groom.

But though Harriet may have cried when she got home on that fatal Friday evening, she was full of the triumph of the hunt on this morning. It is not often that the hounds run into a fox and absolutely surround and kill him on the open ground, and when this is done after a severe run there are seldom many there to see it. If a man can fairly take a fox's brush on such an occasion as that, let him do it; otherwise let him leave it to the huntsman. On the occasion in question it seems that Harriet Tristram might have done so, and some one coming second to her had been gallant enough to do it for her.

"Oh, my lord, you should have been out on Friday," she said to Lord Alston. "We had the prettiest thing I ever saw."

"A great deal too pretty for me, my dear."

"Oh, you who know the roads so well would certainly have been up. I suppose it was thirteen miles from Cobbleton's Bushes to Rotherham Common."

"Not much less, indeed," said his lordship, unwilling to diminish the lady's triumph. Had a gentleman made the boast his lordship would have demonstrated that it was hardly more than eleven.

"I timed it accurately from the moment he went away," said the lady, "and it was exactly fifty-seven minutes. The first part of it was awfully fast. Then we had a little check at Moseley Bottom. But for that, nobody could have lived through it. I never shall forget how deep it was coming up from there to Cringleton. I saw two men get off to ease their horses up the deep bit of plough; and I would have done so too, only my horse would not have stood for me to get up."

"I hope he was none the worse for it," said the sporting character who had been telling Staveley just now how she had cried when she got home that night.

"To tell the truth, I fear it has done him no good. He would not feed, you know, that night at all."

"And broke out into cold sweats," said the gentleman.

"Exactly," said the lady, not quite liking it, but still enduring with patience.

"Rather groggy on his pins the next morning?" suggested her friend.

"Very groggy," said Harriet, regarding the word as one belonging to fair sporting phraseology.

"And inclined to go very much on the points of his toes. I know all about it, Miss Tristram, as well as though I'd seen him."

"There's nothing but rest for it, I suppose."

"Rest and regular exercise—that's the chief thing; and I should give him a mash as often as three times a week. He'll be all right again in three or four weeks,—that is if he's sound, you know."

"Oh, as sound as a bell," said Miss Tristram.

"He'll never be the same horse on a road, though," said the sporting gentleman, shaking his head and whispering to Staveley.

And now the time had come at which they were to move. They always met at eleven; and at ten minutes past, to the moment, Jacob the huntsman would summons the old hounds from off their haunches. "I believe we may be moving, Jacob," said Mr. Williams, the master.

"The time be up," said Jacob, looking at a ponderous timekeeper that might with truth be called a hunting-watch; and then they all moved slowly away back from the Grange, down a farm-road which led to Monkton Wood, distant from the old house perhaps a quarter of a mile.

"May we go as far as the wood?" said Miss Furnival to Augustus. "Without being made to ride over hedges, I mean."

"Oh, dear, yes; and ride about the wood half the day. It will be an hour and a half before a fox will break—even if he ever breaks."

"Dear me! how tired you will be of us. Now do say something pretty, Mr. Staveley."

"It's not my *metier*. We shall be tired, not of you, but of the thing. Galloping up and down the same cuts in the wood for an hour and a half is not exciting; nor does it improve the matter much if we stand still, as one should do by rights."

"That would be very slow."

"You need not be afraid. They never do here. Everybody will be rushing about as though the very world depended on their galloping."

"I'm so glad; that's just what I like."

"Everybody except Lord Alston, Miss Tristram, and the other old stagers. They will husband their horses, and come out as fresh at two o'clock as though they were only just out. There is nothing so valuable as experience in hunting."

"Do you think it nice seeing a young lady with so much hunting knowledge?"

"Now you want me to talk slander, but I won't do it. I admire the Miss Tristrams exceedingly, and especially Julia."

"And which is Julia?"

"The youngest; that one riding by herself."

"And why don't you go and express your admiration?"

"Ah, me! why don't we all express the admiration that we feel, and pour sweet praises into the ears of the lady that excites it? Because we are cowards, Miss Furnival, and are afraid even of such a weak thing as a woman."

"Dear me! I should hardly have thought that you would suffer from such terror as that."

"Because you don't quite know me, Miss Furnival."

"And Miss Julia Tristram is the lady that has excited it?"

"If it be not she, it is some other fair votary of Diana at present riding into Monkton Wood."

"Ah, now you are giving me a riddle to guess, and I never guess riddles. I won't even try at it. But they all seem to be stopping."

"Yes, they are putting the hounds into covert. Now

if you want to show yourself a good sportsman, look at your watch. You see that Julia Tristram has got hers in her hand."

"What's that for?"

"To time the hounds; to see how long they'll be before they find. It's very pretty work in a small gorse, but in a great wood like this I don't care much for being so accurate. But for Heaven's sake don't tell Julia Tristram; I should not have a chance if she thought I was so slack."

And now the hounds were scattering themselves in the wood, and the party rode up the centre roadway towards a great circular opening in the middle of it.

Here it was the recognised practice of the horsemen to stand, and those who properly did their duty would stand there; but very many lingered at the gate, knowing that there was but one other exit from the wood, without overcoming the difficulty of a very intricate and dangerous fence.

"There be a gap, baint there?" said one farmer to another, as they were entering.

"Yes, there be a gap, and young Grubbles broke his 'orse's back a getting over of it last year," said the second farmer.

"Did he though?" said the first; and so they both remained at the gate.

And others, a numerous body, including most of the ladies, galloped up and down the cross ways, because the master of the hounds and the huntsman did so.

"D—— those fellows riding up and down after me wherever I go," said the master. "I believe they think I'm to be hunted." This seemed to be said more

especially to Miss Tristram, who was always in the master's confidence; and I fear that the fellows alluded to included Miss Furnival and Miss Staveley.

And then there came the sharp, eager sound of a hound's voice; a single, sharp, happy opening bark, and Harriet Tristram was the first to declare that the game was found. "Just five minutes and twenty seconds, my lord," said Julia Tristram to Lord Alston. "That's not bad in a large wood like this."

"Uncommonly good," said his lordship. "And when are we to get out of it?"

"They'll be here for the next hour, I'm afraid," said the lady, not moving her horse from the place where she stood, though many of the more impetuous of the men were already rushing away to the gates. "I have seen a fox go away from here without resting a minute; but that was later in the season, at the end of February. Foxes are away from home then." All which observations showed a wonderfully acute sporting observation on the part of Miss Tristram.

And then the music of the dogs became fast and frequent, as they drove the brute across and along from one part of the large wood to another. Sure there was no sound like it for filling a man's heart with an eager desire to be at work. What may be the trumpet in battle I do not know, but I can imagine that it has the same effect. And now a few of them were standing on that wide circular piece of grass, when a sound the most exciting of them all reached their ears. "He's away!" shouted a whip from the corner of the wood. The good-natured beast, though as yet it was hardly past Christmas-time, had consented to bless at once so many anxious sportsmen, and had left the back of the covert with the full pack at his heels.

"There is no gate that way, Miss Tristram," said a gentleman.

"There's a double ditch and bank that will do as well," said she, and away she went directly after the hounds, regardless altogether of the gates. Peregrine Orme and Felix Graham, who were with her, followed close upon her track.

CHAPTER II

BREAKING COVERT

“THERE’S a double ditch and bank that will do as well,” Miss Tristram had said when she was informed that there was no gate out of the wood at the side on which the fox had broken. The gentleman who had tendered the information might as well have held his tongue, for Miss Tristram knew the wood intimately, was acquainted with the locality of all its gates, and was acquainted also with the points at which it might be left, without the assistance of any gate at all, by those who were well mounted and could ride their horses. Therefore she had thus replied, “There’s a double ditch and bank that will do as well.” And for the double ditch and bank at the end of one of the grassy roadways Miss Tristram at once prepared herself.

“That’s the gap where Grubbles broke his horse’s back,” said a man in a red coat to Peregrine Orme, and so saying he made up his wavering mind and galloped away as fast as his nag could carry him. But Peregrine would not avoid a fence at which a lady was not afraid to ride; and Felix Graham, knowing little but fearing nothing, followed Peregrine Orme.

At the end of the roadway, in the middle of the track, there was the gap. For a footman it was doubtless the easiest way over the fence, for the ditch on that side was half filled up, and there was space enough left of the half-broken bank for a man’s scrambling feet;

but Miss Tristram at once knew that it was a bad place for a horse. The second or further ditch was the really difficult obstacle, and there was no footing in the gap from which a horse could take his leap. To the right of this the fence was large and required a good horse, but Miss Tristram knew her animal and was accustomed to large fences. The trained beast went well across on to the bank, poised himself there for a moment, and taking a second spring carried his mistress across into the further field apparently with ease. In that field the dogs were now running all together, so that a sheet might have covered them; and Miss Tristram, exulting within her heart and holding in her horse, knew that she had got away uncommonly well.

Peregrine Orme followed,—a little to the right of the lady's passage, so that he might have room for himself, and do no mischief in the event of Miss Tristram or her horse making any mistake at the leap. He also got well over. But, alas! in spite of such early success he was destined to see nothing of the hunt that day! Felix Graham, thinking that he would obey instructions by letting his horse do as he pleased, permitted the beast to come close upon Orme's track, and to make his jump before Orme's horse had taken his second spring.

"Have a care," said Peregrine, feeling that the two were together on the bank, "or you'll shove me into the ditch." He however got well over.

Felix, attempting to "have a care" just when his doing so could be of no avail, gave his horse a pull with the curb as he was preparing for his second spring. The outside ditch was broad and deep and well banked up, and required that an animal should have all his power. It was at such a moment as this that he

should have been left to do his work without injudicious impediment from his rider. But poor Graham was thinking only of Orme's caution, and attempted to stop the beast when any positive and absolute stop was out of the question. The horse made his jump, and, crippled as he was, jumped short. He came with his knees against the further bank, threw his rider, and then in his struggle to right himself rolled over him.

Felix felt at once that he was much hurt—that he had indeed come to grief; but still he was not stunned nor did he lose his presence of mind. The horse succeeded in gaining his feet, and then Felix also jumped up and even walked a step or two towards the head of the animal with the object of taking the reins. But he found that he could not raise his arm, and he found also that he could hardly breathe.

Both Peregrine and Miss Tristram looked back. "There's nothing wrong I hope," said the lady; and then she rode on. And let it be understood that in hunting those who are in advance generally do ride on. The lame and the halt and the wounded, if they cannot pick themselves up, have to be picked up by those who come after them. But Peregrine saw that there was no one else coming that way. The memory of young Grubbles' fate had placed an interdict on that pass out of the wood, which nothing short of the pluck and science of Miss Tristram was able to disregard. Two cavaliers she had carried with her. One she had led on to instant slaughter, and the other remained to look after his fallen brother-in-arms. Miss Tristram in the mean time was in the next field and had settled well down to her work.

"Are you hurt, old fellow?" said Peregrine, turning back his horse, but still not dismounting.

"Not much, I think," said Graham, smiling. "There's something wrong about my arm,—but don't you wait." And then he found that he spoke with difficulty.

"Can you mount again?"

"I don't think I'll mind that. Perhaps I'd better sit down." Then Peregrine Orme knew that Graham was hurt, and jumping off his own horse he gave up all hope of the hunt.

"Here, you fellow, come and hold these horses." So invoked a boy who in following the sport had got as far as this ditch did as he was bid, and scrambled over. "Sit down, Graham; there; I'm afraid you are hurt. Did he roll on you?" But Felix merely looked up into his face,—still smiling. He was now very pale, and for the moment could not speak. Peregrine came close to him, and gently attempted to raise the wounded limb; whereupon Graham shuddered, and shook his head.

"I fear it is broken," said Peregrine. Graham nodded his head, and raised his left hand to his breast; and Peregrine then knew that something else was amiss also.

I don't know any feeling more disagreeable than that produced by being left alone in a field, when out hunting, with a man who has been very much hurt and who is incapable of riding or walking. The hurt man himself has the privilege of his infirmities and may remain quiescent; but you, as his only attendant, must do something. You must for the moment do all, and if you do wrong the whole responsibility lies on your shoulders. If you leave a wounded man on the damp ground, in the middle of winter, while you run away, five miles perhaps, to the next doctor, he may not

improbably—as you then think—be dead before you come back. You don't know the way; you are heavy yourself, and your boots are very heavy. You must stay therefore; but as you are no doctor you don't in the least know what is the amount of the injury. In your great trouble you begin to roar for assistance; but the woods re-echo your words, and the distant sound of the huntsman's horn, as he summons his hounds at a check, only mocks your agony.

But Peregrine had a boy with him. "Get upon that horse," he said at last; "ride round to Farmer Griggs, and tell him to send somebody here with a spring cart. He has got a spring cart I know;—and a mattress in it."

"But I haint no gude at roiding like," said the boy, looking with dismay at Orme's big horse.

"Then run; that will be better, for you can go through the wood. You know where Farmer Griggs lives. The first farm the other side of the Grange."

"Ay, ay, I knows where Farmer Griggs lives well enough."

"Run then; and if the cart is here in half an hour I'll give you a sovereign."

Inspired by the hopes of such wealth, golden wealth, wealth for a life-time, the boy was quickly back over the fence, and Peregrine was left along with Felix Graham. He was now sitting down, with his feet hanging into the ditch, and Peregrine was kneeling behind him. "I am sorry I can do nothing more," said he; "but I fear we must remain here till the cart comes."

"I am—so—vexed—about your hunt," said Felix, gasping as he spoke. He had in fact broken his right arm which, had been twisted under him as the horse

rolled, and two of his ribs had been staved in by the pommel of his saddle. Many men have been worse hurt and have hunted again before the end of the season, but the fracture of three bones does make a man uncomfortable for the time. "Now the cart—is—sent for, couldn't you—go on?" But it was not likely that Peregrine Orme would do that. "Never mind me," he said. "When a fellow is hurt he has always to do as he's told. You had better have a drop of sherry. Look here: I've got a flask at my saddle. There; you can support yourself with that arm a moment. Did you ever see horses stand so quiet? I've got hold of yours, and now I'll fasten them together. I say, Whitefoot, you don't kick, do you?" And then he contrived to picket the horses to two branches, and having got out his case of sherry, poured a small modicum into the silver mug which was attached to the apparatus, and again supported Graham while he drank. "You'll be as right as a trivet by-and-by; only you'll have to make Noningsby your head-quarters for the next six weeks." And then the same idea passed through the mind of each of them;—how little a man need be pitied for such a misfortune if Madeline Staveley would consent to be his nurse.

No man could have less surgical knowledge than Peregrine Orme, but nevertheless he was such a man as one would like to have with him if one came to grief in such a way. He was cheery and up-hearted, but at the same time gentle and even thoughtful. His voice was pleasant and his touch could be soft. For many years afterwards Felix remembered how that sherry had been held to his lips, and how the young heir of The Cleeve had knelt behind him in his red coat, supporting him as he became weary with waiting, and say-

ing pleasant words to him through the whole. Felix Graham was a man who would remember such things.

In running through the wood the boy first encountered three horsemen. They were the judge, with his daughter Madeline and Miss Furnival. "There be a mon there who be a'most dead," said the boy, hardly able to speak for want of breath. "I be agoing for Farmer Griggs's cart." And then they stopped him a moment to ask for some description, but the boy could tell them nothing to indicate that the wounded man was one of their friends. It might however be Augustus, and so the three rode on quickly towards the fence, knowing nothing of the circumstances of the ditches which would make it out of their power to get to the fallen sportsman.

But Peregrine heard the sound of the horses and the voices of the horsemen. "By Jove, there's a lot of them coming down here," said he. "It's the judge and two of the girls. Oh, Miss Staveley, I'm so glad you've come. Graham has had a bad fall and hurt himself. You haven't a shawl, have you? the ground is so wet under him."

"It doesn't signify at all," said Felix, looking round and seeing the faces of his friends on the other side of the bank.

Madeline Staveley gave a slight shriek which her father did not notice, but which Miss Furnival heard very plainly. "Oh! papa," she said, "cannot you get over to him?" And then she began to bethink herself whether it were possible that she should give up something of her dress to protect the man who was hurt from the damp muddy ground on which he lay.

"Can you hold my horse, dear?" said the judge,

slowly dismounting; for the judge, though he rode every day on sanitary considerations, had not a sportsman's celerity in leaving and recovering his saddle. But he did get down, and burdened as he was with a great-coat, he did succeed in crossing that accursed fence.

Accursed it was from henceforth in the annals of the H. H., and none would ride it but dare-devils who professed themselves willing to go at anything. Miss Tristram, however, always declared that there was nothing in it—though she avoided it herself, whispering to her friends that she had led others to grief there, and might possibly do so again if she persevered.

“Could you hold the horse?” said Madeline to Miss Furnival; “and I will go for a shawl to the carriage.” Miss Furnival declared that to the best of her belief she could not, but nevertheless the animal was left with her, and Madeline turned round and galloped back towards the carriage. She made her horse do his best though her eyes were nearly blinded with tears, and went straight on for the carriage, though she would have given much for a moment to hide those tears before she reached it.

“Oh, mamma! give me a thick shawl; Mr. Graham has hurt himself in the field, and is lying on the grass.” And then in some incoherent and quick manner she had to explain what she knew of the accident before she could get a carriage-cloak out of the carriage. This, however, she did succeed in doing, and in some manner, very unintelligible to herself afterwards, she did gallop back with her burden. She passed the cloak over to Peregrine, who clambered up the bank to get it, while the judge remained on the ground, supporting the young barrister. Felix Graham, though he was weak,

was not stunned or senseless, and he knew well who it was that had procured for him that comfort.

And then the carriage followed Madeline, and there was quite a concourse of servants and horses and ladies on the inside of the fence. But the wounded man was still unfortunately on the other side. No cart from Farmer Griggs made its appearance, though it was now more than half an hour since the boy had gone. Carts, when they are wanted in such sudden haste, do not make their appearance. It was two miles through the wood to Mr. Griggs's farm-yard, and more than three miles back by any route which the cart could take. And then it might be more than probable that in Farmer Griggs's establishment there was not always a horse ready in harness, or a groom at hand prepared to yoke him. Peregrine had become very impatient, and had more than once invoked a silent anathema on the farmer's head; but nevertheless there was no appearance of the cart.

"We must get him across the ditches into the carriage," said the judge.

"If Lady Staveley will let us do that," said Peregrine.

"The difficulty is not with Lady Staveley but with these nasty ditches," said the judge, for he had been up to his knees in one of them, and the water had penetrated his boots. But the task was at last done. Mrs. Arbuthnot stood up on the back seat of the carriage so that she might hold the horses, and the coachman and footman got across into the field. "It would be better to let me lie here all day," said Felix, as three of them struggled back with their burden, the judge bringing up the rear with two hunting-whips and Peregrine's cap. "How on earth any one would think of

riding over such a place as that!" said the judge. But then, when he had been a young man it had not been the custom for barristers to go out hunting.

Madeline, as she saw the wounded man carefully laid on the back seat of the carriage, almost wished that she could have her mother's place that she might support him. Would they be careful enough with him? Would they remember how terrible must be the pain of that motion to one so hurt as he was? And then she looked into his face as he was made to lean back, and she saw that he still smiled. Felix Graham was by no means a handsome man; I should hardly sin against the truth if I were to say that he was ugly. But Madeline, as she looked at him now, lying there utterly without colour but always with that smile on his countenance, thought that no face to her liking had ever been more gracious. She still rode close to them as they went down the grassy road, saying never a word. And Miss Furnival rode there also, somewhat in the rear, condoling with the judge as to his wet feet.

"Miss Furnival," he said, "when a judge forgets himself and goes out hunting he has no right to expect anything better. What would your father have said had he seen me clambering up the bank with young Orme's hunting cap between my teeth? I positively did."

"He would have rushed to assist you," said Miss Furnival, with a little burst of enthusiasm which was hardly needed on the occasion. And then Peregrine came after them leading Graham's horse. He had been compelled to return to the field and ride both the horses back into the wood, one after the other, while the footman held them. That riding back over fences in cold

blood is the work that really tries a man's nerve. And a man has to do it too when no one is looking on. How he does crane and falter and look about for an easy place at such a moment as that! But when the blood is cold no places are easy.

The procession got back to Noningsby without adventure, and Graham as a matter of course was taken up to his bed. One of the servants had been despatched to Alston for a surgeon, and in an hour or two the extent of the misfortune was known. The right arm was broken—"very favourably," as the doctor observed. But two ribs were broken—"rather unfavourably." There was some talk of hæmorrhage and inward wounds, and Sir Jacob from Seville Row was suggested by Lady Staveley. But the judge, knowing the extent of Graham's means, made some further preliminary inquiries, and it was considered that Sir Jacob would not be needed—at any rate not as yet.

"Why don't they send for him?" said Madeline to her mother with rather more than her wonted energy.

"Your papa does not think it necessary, my dear. It would be very expensive, you know."

"But, mamma, would you let a man die because it would cost a few pounds to cure him?"

"My dear, we all hope that Mr. Graham won't die—at any rate not at present. If there be any danger you may be sure that your papa will send for the best advice."

But Madeline was by no means satisfied. She could not understand economy in a matter of life and death. If Sir Jacob's coming would have cost fifty pounds, or a hundred, what would that have signified, weighed in such a balance? Such a sum would be nothing to her father. Had Augustus fallen and broken his arm all

the Sir Jacobs in London would not have been considered too costly could their joint coming have mitigated any danger. She did not however dare to speak to her mother again, so she said a word or two to Peregrine Orme, who was constant in his attendance on Felix. Peregrine had been very kind, and she had seen it, and her heart therefore warmed towards him.

"Don't you think he ought to have more advice, Mr. Orme?"

"Well, no; I don't know. He's very jolly, you know; only he can't talk. One of the bones ran into him, but I believe he's all right."

"Oh, but that is so frightful!" and the tears were again in her eyes.

"If I were him I should think one doctor enough. But it's easy enough having a fellow down from London, you know, if you like it."

"If he should get worse, Mr. Orme——." And then Peregrine made her a sort of promise, but in doing so an idea shot through his poor heart of what the truth might really be. He went back and looked at Felix who was sleeping. "If it is so I must bear it," he said to himself; "but I'll fight it on;" and a quick thought ran through his brain of his own deficiencies. He knew that he was not clever and bright in talk like Felix Graham. He could not say the right thing at the right moment without forethought. How he wished that he could! But still he would fight it on, as he would have done any losing match,—to the last. And then he sat down by Felix's head, and resolved that he would be loyal to his new friend all the same—loyal in all things needful. But still he would fight it on.

CHAPTER III

ANOTHER FALL

FELIX GRAHAM had plenty of nurses, but Madeline was not one of them. Augustus Staveley came home while the Alston doctor was still busy at the broken bones, and of course he would not leave his friend. He was one of those who had succeeded in the hunt, and consequently had heard nothing of the accident till the end of it. Miss Tristram had been the first to tell him that Mr. Graham had fallen in leaving the covert, but having seen him rise to his legs she had not thought he was seriously hurt.

"I do not know much about your friend," she had said; "but I think I may comfort you by an assurance that your horse is none the worse. I could see as much as that."

"Poor Felix!" said Staveley. "He has lost a magnificent run. I suppose we are nine or ten miles from Monkton Grange now?"

"Eleven, if we are a yard," said the lady. "It was an ugly country, but the pace was nothing wonderful." And then others dropped in, and at last came tidings about Graham. At first there was a whisper that he was dead. He had ridden over Orme, it was said; had nearly killed him, and had quite killed himself. Then the report became less fatal. Both horses were dead, but Graham was still living though with most of his bones broken.

"Don't believe it," said Miss Tristram. "In what condition Mr. Graham may be I won't say; but that your horse was safe and sound after he got over the fence, of that you may take my word." And thus, in a state of uncertainty, obtaining fresh rumours from every person he passed, Staveley hurried home. "Right arm and two ribs," Peregrine said to him, as he met him in the hall. "Is that all?" said Augustus. It was clear therefore that he did not think so much about it as his sister.

"If you had let her have her head she'd never have come down like that," Augustus said, as he sat that evening by his friend's bedside.

"But he pulled off, I fancy, to avoid riding over me," said Peregrine.

"Then he must have come too quick at his leap," said Augustus. "You should have steadied him as he came to it." From all which Graham perceived that a man cannot learn how to ride any particular horse by two or three words of precept.

"If you talk any more about the horse, or the hunt, or the accident, neither of you shall stay in the room," said Lady Staveley, who came in at that moment. But they both did stay in the room, and said a great deal more about the hunt, and the horse, and the accident before they left it; and even became so far reconciled to the circumstance that they had a hot glass of brandy and water each, sitting by Graham's fire.

"But, Augustus, do tell me how he is," Madeline said to her brother, as she caught him going to his room. She had become ashamed of asking any more questions of her mother.

"He's all right; only he'll be as fretful as a porcupine, shut up there. At least I should be. Are there

lots of novels in the house? Mind you send for a batch to-morrow. Novels are the only chance a man has when he's laid up like that." Before breakfast on the following morning Madeline had sent off to the Alston circulating library a list of all the best new novels of which she could remember the names.

No definite day had hitherto been fixed for Peregrine's return to The Cleeve, and under the present circumstances he still remained at Noningsby assisting to amuse Felix Graham. For two days after the accident such seemed to be his sole occupation; but in truth he was looking for an opportunity to say a word or two to Miss Staveley, and paving his way as best he might for that great speech which he was fully resolved that he would make before he left the house. Once or twice he bethought himself whether he would not endeavour to secure for himself some confidant in the family, and obtain the sanction and special friendship either of Madeline's mother, or her sister, or her brother. But what if after that she should reject him? Would it not be worse for him then that any one should have known of his defeat? He could, as he thought, endure to suffer alone; but on such a matter as that pity would be unendurable. So as he sat there by Graham's fire-side, pretending to read one of poor Madeline's novels for the sake of companionship, he determined that he would tell no one of his intention;—no one till he could make the opportunity for telling her.

And when he did meet her, and find, now and again, some moment for saying a word alone to her, she was very gracious to him. He had been so kind and gentle with Felix, there was so much in him that was sweet and good and honest, so much that such an event as this brought forth and made manifest, that Madeline, and

indeed the whole family, could not but be gracious to him. Augustus would declare that he was the greatest brick he had ever known, repeating all Graham's words as to the patience with which the embryo baronet had knelt behind him on the cold muddy ground, supporting him for an hour, till the carriage had come up. Under such circumstances how could Madeline refrain from being gracious to him?

"But it is all from favour to Graham!" Peregrine would say to himself with bitterness; and yet though he said so he did not quite believe it. Poor fellow! It was all from favour to Graham. And could he have thoroughly believed the truth of those words which he repeated to himself so often, he might have spared himself much pain. He might have spared himself much pain, and possibly some injury; for if aught could now tend to mature in Madeline's heart an affection which was but as yet nascent, it would be the offer of some other lover. But such reasoning on the matter was much too deep for Peregrine Orme. "It may be," he said to himself, "that she only pities him because he is hurt. If so, is not this time better for me than any other? If it be that she loves him, let me know it, and be out of my pain." It did not then occur to him that circumstances such as those in question could not readily be made explicit;—that Madeline might refuse his love, and yet leave him no wiser than he now was as to her reasons for so refusing;—perhaps, indeed, leave him less wise, with increased cause for doubt and hopeless hope, and the green melancholy of a rejected lover.

Madeline during these two days said no more about the London doctor; but it was plain to all who watched her that her anxiety as to the patient was much more

keen than that of the other ladies of the house. "She always thinks everybody is going to die," Lady Staveley said to Miss Furnival, intending, not with any consummate prudence, to account to that acute young lady for her daughter's solicitude. "We had a cook here, three months since, who was very ill, and Madeline would never be easy till the doctor assured her that the poor woman's danger was altogether past."

"She is so very warm-hearted," said Miss Furnival in reply. "It is quite delightful to see her. And she will have such pleasure when she sees him come down from his room."

Lady Staveley on this immediate occasion said nothing to her daughter, but Mrs. Arbuthnot considered that a sisterly word might perhaps be spoken in due season.

"The doctor says he is doing quite well now," Mrs. Arbuthnot said to her, as they were sitting alone.

"But does he indeed? Did you hear him?" said Madeline, who was suspicious.

"He did so, indeed. I heard him myself. But he says also that he ought to remain here, at any rate for the next fortnight,—if mamma can permit it without inconvenience."

"Of course she can permit it. No one would turn any person out of their house in such a condition as that!"

"Papa and mamma both will be very happy that he should stay here;—of course they would not do what you call turning him out. But, Mad., my darling,"—and then she came up close and put her arm round her sister's waist,—“I think mamma would be more comfortable in his remaining here if your charity towards him were—what shall I say?—less demonstrative.”

"What do you mean, Isabella?"

"Dearest, dearest; you must not be angry with me. Nobody has hinted to me a word on the subject, nor do I mean to hint anything that can possibly be hurtful to you."

"But what do you mean?"

"Don't you know, darling? He is a young man—and—and—people see with such unkind eyes, and hear with such scandal-loving ears. There is that Miss Furnival——"

"If Miss Furnival can think such things, I for one do not care what she thinks."

"No, nor do I;—not as regards any important result. But may it not be well to be careful? You know what I mean, dearest?"

"Yes—I know. At least I suppose so. And it makes me know also how very cold and shallow and heartless people are! I won't ask any more questions, Isabella; but I can't know that a fellow-creature is suffering in the house,—and a person like him too, so clever, whom we all regard as a friend,—the most intimate friend in the world that Augustus has,—and the best too, as I heard papa himself say,—without caring whether he is going to live or die."

"There is no danger now, you know."

"Very well; I am glad to hear it. Though I know very well that there must be danger after such a terrible accident as that."

"The doctor says there is none."

"At any rate I will not——" And then instead of finishing her sentence she turned away her head and put up her handkerchief to wipe away a tear.

"You are not angry with me, dear?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Oh, no," said Madeline; and then they parted.

For some days after that Madeline asked no question whatever about Felix Graham, but it may be doubted whether this did not make the matter worse. Even Sophia Furnival would ask how he was at any rate twice a day, and Lady Staveley continued to pay him regular visits at stated intervals. As he got better she would sit with him, and brought back reports as to his sayings. But Madeline never discussed any of these; and refrained alike from the conversation, whether his broken bones or his unbroken wit were to be the subject of it. And then Mrs. Arbuthnot, knowing that she would still be anxious, gave her private bulletins as to the state of the sick man's progress;—all which gave an air of secrecy to the matter, and caused even Madeline to ask herself why this should be so.

On the whole I think that Mrs. Arbuthnot was wrong. Mrs. Arbuthnot and the whole Staveley family would have regarded a mutual attachment between Mr. Graham and Madeline as a great family misfortune. The judge was a considerate father to his children, holding that a father's control should never be brought to bear unnecessarily. In looking forward to the future prospect of his sons and daughters it was his theory that they should be free to choose their life's companions for themselves. But nevertheless it could not be agreeable to him that his daughter should fall in love with a man who had nothing, and whose future success at his own profession seemed to be so very doubtful. On the whole I think that Mrs. Arbuthnot was wrong, and that the feeling that did exist in Madeline's bosom might more possibly have died away, had no word been said about it—even by a sister.

And then another event happened which forced her to look into her own heart. Peregrine Orme did make his proposal. He waited patiently during those two or three days in which the doctor's visits were frequent, feeling that he could not talk about himself while any sense of danger pervaded the house. But then at last a morning came on which the surgeon declared that he need not call again till the morrow; and Felix himself, when the medical back was turned, suggested that it might as well be to-morrow week. He began also to scold his friends, and look bright about the eyes, and drink his glass of sherry in a pleasant dinner-table fashion, not as if he were swallowing his physic. And Peregrine, when he saw all this, resolved that the moment had come for the doing of his deed of danger. The time would soon come at which he must leave Noningsby, and he would not leave Noningsby till he had learned his fate.

Lady Staveley, who with a mother's eye had seen her daughter's solicitude for Felix Graham's recovery,—had seen it, and animadverted on it to herself,—had seen also, or at any rate had suspected, that Peregrine Orme looked on her daughter with favouring eyes. Now Peregrine Orme would have satisfied Lady Staveley as a son-in-law. She liked his ways and manners of thought—in spite of those rumours as to the rat-catching which had reached her ears. She regarded him as quite clever enough to be a good husband, and no doubt appreciated the fact that he was to inherit his title and The Cleeve from an old grandfather instead of a middle-aged father. She therefore had no objection to leave Peregrine alone with her one ewe-lamb, and therefore the opportunity which he sought was at last found.

"I shall be leaving Noningsby to-morrow, Miss Staveley," he said one day, having secured an interview in the back drawing-room—in that happy half-hour which occurs in winter before the world betakes itself to dress. Now I here profess my belief, that out of every ten set offers made by ten young lovers, nine of such offers are commenced with an intimation that the lover is going away. There is a dash of melancholy in such tidings well suited to the occasion. If there be any spark of love on the other side it will be elicited by the idea of a separation. And then, also, it is so frequently the actual fact. This making of an offer is in itself a hard piece of business,—a job to be postponed from day to day. It is so postponed, and thus that dash of melancholy, and that idea of separation, are brought in at the important moment with so much appropriate truth.

"I shall be leaving Noningsby to-morrow, Miss Staveley," Peregrine said.

"Oh dear! we shall be so sorry. But why are you going? What will Mr. Graham and Augustus do without you? You ought to stay at least till Mr. Graham can leave his room."

"Poor Graham!—not that I think he is much to be pitied either; but he won't be about for some weeks to come yet."

"You do not think he is worse; do you?"

"Oh, dear, no; not at all." And Peregrine was unconsciously irritated against his friend by the regard which her tone evinced. "He is quite well; only they will not let him be moved. But, Miss Staveley, it was not of Mr. Graham that I was going to speak."

"No—only I thought he would miss you so much." And then she blushed, though the blush in the dark of

the evening was lost upon him. She remembered that she was not to speak about Felix Graham's health, and it almost seemed as though Mr. Orme had rebuked her for doing so in saying that he had not come there to speak of him.

"Lady Staveley's house has been turned up side down since this affair, and it is time now that some part of the trouble should cease."

"Oh! mamma does not mind it at all."

"I know how good she is; but nevertheless, Miss Staveley, I must go to-morrow." And then he paused a moment before he spoke again.

"It will depend entirely upon you," he said, "whether I may have the happiness of returning soon to Noningsby."

"On me, Mr. Orme!"

"Yes, on you. I do not know how to speak properly that which I have to say; but I believe I may as well say it out at once. I have come here now to tell you that I love you and to ask you to be my wife." And then he stopped as though there were nothing more for him to say upon the matter.

It would be hardly extravagant to declare that Madeline's breath was taken away by the very sudden manner in which young Orme had made his proposition. It had never entered her head that she had an admirer in him. Previously to Graham's accident she had thought nothing about him. Since that event she had thought about him a good deal; but altogether as of a friend of Graham's. He had been good and kind to Graham, and therefore she had liked him and had talked to him. He had never said a word to her that had taught her to regard him as a possible lover; and now that he was an actual lover, a declared lover stand-

ing before her, waiting for an answer, she was so astonished that she did not know how to speak. All her ideas, too, as to love,—such ideas as she had ever formed, were confounded by this abruptness. She would have thought, had she brought herself absolutely to think upon it, that all speech of love should be very delicate; that love should grow slowly, and then be whispered softly, doubtingly, and with infinite care. Even had she loved him, or had she been in the way towards loving him, such violence as this would have frightened her and scared her love away. Poor Peregrine! His intentions had been so good and honest! He was so true and hearty, and free from all conceit in the matter! It was a pity that he should have marred his cause by such ill judgment.

But there he stood waiting an answer,—and expecting it to be as open, definite and plain as though he had asked her to take a walk with him. “Madeline,” he said, stretching out his hand when he perceived that she did not speak to him at once. “There is my hand. If it be possible give me yours.”

“Oh, Mr. Orme!”

“I know that I have not said what I had to say very,—very gracefully. But you will not regard that I think. You are too good, and too true.”

She had now seated herself, and he was standing before her. She had retreated to a sofa in order to avoid the hand which he had offered her; but he followed her, and even yet he did not know that he had no chance of success. “Mr. Orme,” she said at last, speaking hardly above her breath, “what has made you do this?”

“What has made me do it? What has made me tell you that I love you?”

"You cannot be in earnest!"

"Not in earnest! By Heavens, Miss Staveley, no man who has said the same words was ever more in earnest. Do you doubt me when I tell you that I love you?"

"Oh, I am so sorry!" And then she hid her face upon the arm of the sofa and burst into tears.

Peregrine stood there, like a prisoner on his trial, waiting for a verdict. He did not know how to plead his cause with any further language; and indeed no further language could have been of any avail. The judge and jury were clear against him, and he should have known the sentence without waiting to have it pronounced in set terms. But in plain words he had made his offer, and in plain words he required that an answer should be given to him. "Well," he said, "will you not speak to me? Will you not tell me whether it shall be so?"

"No,—no,—no," she said.

"You mean that you cannot love me." And as he said this the agony of his tone struck her ear and made her feel that he was suffering. Hitherto she had thought only of herself, and had hardly recognised it as a fact that he could be thoroughly in earnest.

"Mr. Orme, I am very sorry. Do not speak as though you were angry with me. But——"

"But you cannot love me?" And then he stood again silent, for there was no reply. "Is it that, Miss Staveley, that you mean to answer? If you say that with positive assurance, I will trouble you no longer." Poor Peregrine! He was but an unskilled lover!

"No!" she sobbed forth through her tears; but he had so framed his question that he hardly knew what No meant.

"Do you mean that you cannot love me, or may I hope that a day will come——. May I speak to you again——?"

"Oh, no, no! I can answer you now. It grieves me to the heart. I know you are so good. But, Mr. Orme——"

"Well——"

"It can never, never be."

"And I must take that as answer?"

"I can make no other." He still stood before her,—with gloomy and almost angry brow, could she have seen him; and then he thought he would ask her whether there was any other love which had brought about her scorn for him. It did not occur to him, at the first moment, that in doing so he would insult and injure her.

"At any rate I am not flattered by a reply which is at once so decided," he began by saying.

"Oh! Mr. Orme, do not make me more unhappy——"

"But perhaps I am too late. Perhaps——" Then he remembered himself and paused. "Never mind," he said, speaking to himself rather than to her. "Good-bye, Miss Staveley. You will at any rate say good-bye to me. I shall go at once now."

"Go at once! Go away, Mr. Orme?"

"Yes; why should I stay here? Do you think that I could sit down to table with you all after that? I will ask your brother to explain my going; I shall find him in his room. Good-bye."

She took his hand mechanically, and then he left her. When she came down to dinner she looked fur-tively round to his place and saw that it was vacant.

CHAPTER IV

FOOTSTEPS IN THE CORRIDOR

"UPON my word I am very sorry," said the judge. "But what made him go off so suddenly? I hope there's nobody ill at The Cleeve!" And then the judge took his first spoonful of soup.

"No, no; there is nothing of that sort," said Augustus. "His grandfather wants him, and Orme thought he might as well start at once. He was always a sudden harum-scarum fellow like that."

"He's a very pleasant, nice young man," said Lady Staveley; "and never gives himself any airs. I like him exceedingly."

Poor Madeline did not dare to look either at her mother or her brother, but she would have given much to know whether either of them were aware of the cause which had sent Peregrine Orme so suddenly away from the house. At first she thought that Augustus surely did know, and she was wretched as she thought that he might probably speak to her on the subject. But he went on talking about Orme and his abrupt departure till she became convinced that he knew nothing and suspected nothing of what had occurred.

But her mother said never a word after that eulogium which she had uttered, and Madeline read that eulogium altogether aright. It said to her ears that if ever young Orme should again come forward with his suit her

mother would be prepared to receive him as a suitor; and it said, moreover, that if that suitor had been already sent away by any harsh answer, she would not sympathise with that harshness.

The dinner went on much as usual, but Madeline could not bring herself to say a word. She sat between her brother-in-law, Mr. Arbuthnot, on one side, and an old friend of her father's, of thirty years' standing, on the other. The old friend talked exclusively to Lady Staveley, and Mr. Arbuthnot, though he now and then uttered a word or two, was chiefly occupied with his dinner. During the last three or four days she had sat at dinner next to Peregrine Orme, and it seemed to her now that she always had been able to talk to him. She had liked him so much too! Was it not a pity that he should have been so mistaken! And then as she sat after dinner, eating five or six grapes, she felt that she was unable to recall her spirits and look and speak as she was wont to do; a thing had happened which had knocked the ground from under her—had thrown her from her equipoise, and now she lacked the strength to recover herself and hide her dismay.

After dinner, while the gentlemen were still in the dining-room she got a book, and nobody disturbed her as she sat alone pretending to read it. There never had been any intimate friendship between her and Miss Furnival, and that young lady was now employed in taking the chief part in a general conversation about wools. Lady Staveley got through a great deal of wool in the course of the year, as also did the wife of the old thirty-years' friend; but Miss Furnival, short as her experience had been, was able to give a few hints to them both, and did not throw away the occasion.

There was another lady there, rather deaf, to whom Mrs. Arbuthnot devoted herself, and therefore Madeline was allowed to be alone.

Then the men came in, and she was obliged to come forward and officiate at the tea-table. The judge insisted on having the teapot and urn brought into the drawing-room, and liked to have his cup brought to him by one of his own daughters. So she went to work and made the tea, but still she felt that she scarcely knew how to go through her task. What had happened to her that she should be thus beside herself, and hardly capable of refraining from open tears? She knew that her mother was looking at her, and that now and again little things were done to give her ease if any ease were possible.

"Is anything the matter with my Madeline?" said her father, looking up into her face, and holding the hand from which he had taken his cup.

"No, papa; only I have got a headache."

"A headache, dear; that's not usual with you."

"I have seen that she has not been well all the evening," said Lady Staveley; "but I thought that perhaps she might shake it off. You had better go, my dear, if you are suffering. Isabella, I'm sure, will pour out the tea for us."

And so she got away, and skulked slowly up stairs to her own room. She felt that it was skulking. Why should she have been so weak as to have fled in that way? She had no headache—nor was it heartache that had now upset her. But a man had spoken to her openly of love, and no man had ever so spoken to her before.

She did not go direct to her own chamber, but passed along the corridor towards her mother's dressing-room.

It was always her custom to remain there some half-hour before she went to bed, doing little things for her mother, and chatting with any other girl who might be intimate enough to be admitted there. Now she might remain there for an hour alone without danger of being disturbed; and she thought to herself that she would remain there till her mother came, and then unburthen herself of the whole story.

As she went along the corridor she would have to pass the room which had been given up to Felix Graham. She saw that the door was ajar, and as she came close up to it, she found the nurse in the act of coming out from the room. Mrs. Baker had been a very old servant in the judge's family, and had known Madeline from the day of her birth. Her chief occupation for some years had been nursing when there was anybody to nurse, and taking a general care and surveillance of the family's health when there was no special invalid to whom she could devote herself. Since Graham's accident she had been fully employed, and had greatly enjoyed the opportunities it had given her.

Mrs. Baker was in the doorway as Madeline attempted to pass by on tip-toe. "Oh, he's a deal better now, Miss Madeline, so that you needn't be afeard of disturbing;—ain't you, Mr. Graham?" So she was thus brought into absolute contact with her friend, for the first time since he had hurt himself.

"Indeed I am," said Felix. "I only wish they would let me get up and go down stairs. Is that Miss Staveley, Mrs. Baker?"

"Yes, sure. Come, my dear, he's got his dressing gown on, and you may just come to the door and ask him how he does."

"I am very glad to hear that you are so much better,

Mr. Graham," said Madeline, standing in the doorway with averted eyes, and speaking with a voice so low that it only just reached his ears.

"Thank you, Miss Staveley; I shall never know how to express what I feel for you all."

"And there's none of 'em have been more anxious about you than she, I can tell you; and none of 'em ain't kinderhearteder," said Mrs. Baker.

"I hope you will be up soon and be able to come down to the drawing-room," said Madeline. And then she did glance round, and for a moment saw the light of his eye as he sat upright in the bed. He was still pale and thin, or at least she fancied so, and her heart trembled within her as she thought of the danger he had passed.

"I do so long to be able to talk to you again; all the others come and visit me, but I have only heard the sounds of your footsteps as you pass by."

"And yet she always walks like a mouse," said Mrs. Baker.

"But I have always heard them," he said. "I hope Marian thanked you for the books. She told me how you had gotten them for me."

"She should not have said anything about them; it was Augustus who thought of them," said Madeline.

"Marian comes to me four or five times a day," he continued; "I do not know what I should do without her."

"I hope she is not noisy," said Madeline.

"Laws, Miss, he don't care for noise now, only he ain't good at moving yet, and won't be for some while."

"Pray take care of yourself, Mr. Graham," she said; "I need not tell you how anxious we all are for your

recovery. Good-night, Mr. Graham." And then she passed on to her mother's dressing-room, and sitting herself down in an arm-chair opposite to the fire began to think—to think, or else to try to think.

And what was to be the subject of her thoughts? Regarding Peregrine Orme there was very little room for thinking. He had made her an offer, and she had rejected it as a matter of course, seeing that she did not love him. She had no doubt on that head, and was well aware that she could never accept such an offer. On what subject then was it necessary that she should think?

How odd it was that Mr. Graham's room door should have been open on this special evening, and that nurse should have been standing there, ready to give occasion for that conversation! That was the idea that first took possession of her brain. And then she recounted all those few words which had been spoken as though they had had some special value—as though each word had been laden with interest. She felt half ashamed of what she had done in standing there and speaking at his bed-room door, and yet she would not have lost the chance for worlds. There had been nothing in what had passed between her and the invalid. The very words, spoken elsewhere, or in the presence of her mother and sister, would have been insipid and valueless; and yet she sat there feeding on them as though they were of flavour so rich that she could not let the sweetness of them pass from her. She had been stunned at the idea of poor Peregrine's love, and yet she never asked herself what was this new feeling. She did not inquire—not yet at least—whether there might be danger in such feelings.

She remained there, with eyes fixed on the burning

coals, till her mother came up. "What, Madeline," said Lady Staveley, "are you here still? I was in hopes you would have been in bed before this."

"My headache is gone now, mamma; and I waited because——"

"Well, dear; because what?" and her mother came and stood over her and smoothed her hair. "I know very well that something has been the matter. There has been something; eh, Madeline?"

"Yes, mamma."

"And you have remained up that we may talk about it. Is that it, dearest?"

"I did not quite mean that, but perhaps it will be best. I can't be doing wrong, mamma, in telling you."

"Well; you shall judge of that yourself;" and Lady Staveley sat down on the sofa so that she was close to the chair which Madeline still occupied. "As a general rule I suppose you could not be doing wrong; but you must decide. If you have any doubt, wait till to-morrow."

"No, mamma; I will tell you now. Mr. Orme——"

"Well, dearest. Did Mr. Orme say anything specially to you before he went away?"

"He—he——"

"Come to me, Madeline, and sit here. We shall talk better then." And the mother made room beside her on the sofa for her daughter, and Madeline, running over, leaned with her head upon her mother's shoulder. "Well, darling; what did he say? Did he tell you that he loved you?"

"Yes, mamma."

"And you answered him——"

"I could only tell him——"

"Yes, I know. Poor fellow! But, Madeline, is he

not an excellent young man;—one, at any rate, that is lovable? Of course in such a matter the heart must answer for itself. But I, looking at the offer as a mother—I could have been well pleased——”

“But, mamma, I could not——”

“Well, love, there shall be an end of it; at least for the present. When I heard that he had got suddenly away I thought that something had happened.”

“I am so sorry that he should be unhappy, for I know that he is good.”

“Yes, he is good; and your father likes him, and Augustus. In such a matter as this, Madeline, I would never say a word to persuade you. I should think it wrong to do so. But it may be, dearest, that he has flurried you by the suddenness of his offer; and that you have not yet thought much about it.”

“But, mamma, I know that I do not love him.”

“Of course. That is natural. It would have been a great misfortune if you had loved him before you had reason to know that he loved you; —a great misfortune. But now,—now that you cannot but think of him, now that you know what his wishes are, perhaps you may learn——”

“But I have refused him, and he has gone away.”

“Young gentlemen under such circumstances sometimes come back again.”

“He won’t come back, mamma, because—because I told him so plainly—I am sure he understands that it is all to be at an end.”

“But if he should, and if you should then think differently towards him——”

“Oh, no!”

“But if you should, it may be well that you should know how all your friends esteem him. In a worldly

view the marriage would be in all respects prudent; and as to disposition and temper, which I admit are much more important, I confess I think that he has all the qualities best adapted to make a wife happy. But, as I said before, the heart must speak for itself."

"Yes, of course. And I know that I shall never love him;—not in that way."

"You may be sure, dearest, that there will be no constraint put upon you. It might be possible that I or your papa should forbid a daughter's marriage, if she had proposed to herself an imprudent match; but neither he nor I would ever use our influence with a child to bring about a marriage because we think it prudent in a worldly point of view." And then Lady Staveley kissed her daughter.

"Dear mamma, I know how good you are to me." And she answered her mother's embrace by the pressure of her arm. But nevertheless she did not feel herself to be quite comfortable. There was something in the words which her mother had spoken which grated against her most cherished feelings;—something, though she by no means knew what. Why had her mother cautioned her in that way, that there might be a case in which she would refuse her sanction to a proposed marriage? Isabella's marriage had been concluded with the full agreement of the whole family; and she, Madeline, had certainly never as yet given cause either to father or mother to suppose that she would be headstrong and imprudent. Might not the caution have been omitted?—or was it intended to apply in any way to circumstances as they now existed?

"You had better go now, dearest," said Lady Staveley, "and for the present we will not think any more about this gallant young knight." And then Madeline,

having said good-night, went off rather crest-fallen to her own room. In doing so she again had to pass Graham's door, and as she went by it, walking not quite on tip-toe, she could not help asking herself whether or no he would really recognise the sound of her footsteps.

It is hardly necessary to say that Lady Staveley had conceived to herself a recognised purpose in uttering that little caution to her daughter; and she would have been quite as well pleased had circumstances taken Felix Graham out of her house instead of Peregrine Orme. But Felix Graham must necessarily remain for the next fortnight, and there could be no possible benefit in Orme's return, at any rate till Graham should have gone.

CHAPTER V

WHAT BRIDGET BOLSTER HAD TO SAY

It has been said in the earlier pages of this story that there was no prettier scenery to be found within thirty miles of London than that by which the little town of Hamworth was surrounded. This was so truly the case that Hamworth was full of lodgings which in the autumn season were always full of lodgers. The middle of winter was certainly not the time for seeing the Hamworth hills to advantage; nevertheless it was soon after Christmas that two rooms were taken there by a single gentleman who had come down for a week, apparently with no other view than that of enjoying himself. He did say something about London confinement and change of air; but he was manifestly in good health, had an excellent appetite, said a great deal about fresh eggs,—which at that time of the year was hardly reasonable, and brought with him his own pale brandy. This gentleman was Mr. Crabwitz.

The house at which he was to lodge had been selected with considerable judgment. It was kept by a tidy old widow known as Mrs. Trump; but those who knew anything of Hamworth affairs were well aware that Mrs. Trump had been left without a shilling, and could not have taken that snug little house in Paradise Row and furnished it completely out of her own means. No.

Mrs. Trump's lodging-house was one of the irons which Samuel Dockwrath ever kept heating in the fire, for the behoof of those sixteen children. He had taken a lease of the house in Paradise Row, having made a bargain and advanced a few pounds while it was yet being built; and he then had furnished it and put in Mrs. Trump. Mrs. Trump received from him wages and a percentage; but to him were paid over the quota of shillings per week in consideration for which the lodgers were accommodated. All of which Mr. Crabwitz had ascertained before he located himself in Paradise Row.

And when he had so located himself he soon began to talk to Mrs. Trump about Mr. Dockwrath. He himself, as he told her in confidence, was in the profession of the law; he had heard of Mr. Dockwrath, and should be very glad if that gentleman would come over and take a glass of brandy and water with him some evening.

"And a very clever, sharp gentleman he is," said Mrs. Trump.

"With a tolerably good business, I suppose?" asked Crabwitz.

"Pretty fair for that, Sir. But he do be turning his hand to everything. He's a mortal long family of his own, and he has need of it all, if it's ever so much. But he'll never be poor for that want of looking after it."

But Mr. Dockwrath did not come near his lodger on the first evening, and Mr. Crabwitz made acquaintance with Mrs. Dockwrath before he saw her husband. The care of the sixteen children was not supposed to be so onerous but that she could find a moment now and then to see whether Mrs. Trump kept the furniture

properly dusted, and did not infringe any of the Dockwrathian rules. These were very strict; and whenever they were broken it was on the head of Mrs. Dockwrath that the anger of the ruler mainly fell.

"I hope you find everything comfortable, Sir," said poor Miriam, having knocked at the sitting-room door when Crabwitz had just finished his dinner.

"Yes, thank you; very nice. Is that Mrs. Dockwrath?"

"Yes, Sir. I'm Mrs. Dockwrath. As it's we who own the room I looked in to see if anything's wanting."

"You are very kind. No; nothing is wanting. But I should be delighted to make your acquaintance if you would stay for a moment. Might I ask you to take a chair?" and Mr. Crabwitz handed her one.

"Thank you; no, Sir. I won't intrude."

"Not at all, Mrs. Dockwrath. But the fact is, I'm a lawyer myself, and I should be so glad to become known to your husband. I have heard a great deal of his name lately as to a rather famous case in which he is employed."

"Not the Orley Farm case?" said Mrs. Dockwrath immediately.

"Yes, yes; exactly."

"And is he going on with that, Sir?" asked Mrs. Dockwrath with greater interest.

"Is he not? I know nothing about it myself, but I always supposed that such was the case. If I had such a wife as you, Mrs. Dockwrath, I should not leave her in doubt as to what I was doing in my own profession."

"I know nothing about it, Mr. Cooke;"—for it was as Mr. Cooke that he now sojourned at Hamworth. Not that it should be supposed he had received instructions from Mr. Furnival to come down to that place

under a false name. From Mr. Furnival he had received no further instructions on that matter than those conveyed at the end of a previous chapter. "I know nothing about it, Mr. Cooke, and don't want to know generally. But I am anxious about this Orley Farm case. I do hope that he's going to drop it." And then Mr. Crabwitz elicited her view of the case with great ease.

On that evening, about nine, Mr. Dockwrath did go over to Paradise Row, and did allow himself to be persuaded to mix a glass of brandy and water and light a cigar. "My missus tells me, Sir, that you belong to the profession as well as myself."

"Oh, yes; I'm a lawyer, Mr. Dockwrath."

"Practising in town as an attorney, Sir?"

"Not as an attorney on my own hook exactly. I chiefly employ my time in getting up cases for barristers. There's a good deal done in that way."

"Oh, indeed," said Mr. Dockwrath, beginning to feel himself the bigger man of the two; and from that moment he patronised his companion instead of allowing himself to be patronised.

This went against the grain with Mr. Crabwitz, but, having an object to gain, he bore it. "We hear a great deal up in London just at present about this Orley Farm case, and I always hear your name as connected with it. I had no idea when I was taking these lodgings that I was coming into a house belonging to that Mr. Dockwrath."

"The same party, Sir," said Mr. Dockwrath, blowing the smoke out of his mouth as he looked up to the ceiling.

And then by degrees Mr. Crabwitz drew him into conversation. Dockwrath was by nature quite as clever

a man as Crabwitz, and in such a matter as this was not one to be outwitted easily; but in truth he had no objection to talk about the Orley Farm case. "I have taken it up on public motives, Mr. Cooke," he said, "and I mean to go through with it."

"Oh, of course; in such a case as that you will no doubt go through with it?"

"That's my intention, I assure you. And I tell you what; young Mason,—that's the son of the widow of the old man who made the will——"

"Or rather who did not make it, as you say."

"Yes, yes; he made the will; but he did not make the codicil—and that young Mason has no more right to the property than you have."

"Hasn't he, now?"

"No; and I can prove it too."

"Well; the general opinion in the profession is that Lady Mason will stand her ground and hold her own. I don't know what the points are myself, but I have heard it discussed, and that is certainly what people think."

"Then people will find that they are very much mistaken."

"I was talking to one of Round's young men about it, and I fancy they are not very sanguine."

"I do not care a fig for Round or his young men. It would be quite as well for Joseph Mason if Round and Crook gave up the matter altogether. It lies in a nutshell, and the truth must come out whatever Round and Crook may choose to say. And I'll tell you more—old Furnival, big a man as he thinks himself, cannot save her."

"Has he anything to do with it?" asked Mr. Cooke.

"Yes; the sly old fox. My belief is that only for

him she'd give up the battle, and be down on her marrow-bones asking for mercy."

"She'd have little chance of mercy, from what I hear of Joseph Mason."

"She'd have to give up the property of course. And even then I don't know whether he'd let her off. By Heavens! he couldn't let her off unless I chose." And then by degrees he told Mr. Cooke some of the circumstances of the case.

But it was not till the fourth evening that Mr. Dockwrath spent with his lodger that the intimacy had so far progressed as to enable Mr. Crabwitz to proceed with his little scheme. On that day Mr. Dockwrath had received a notice that at noon on the following morning Mr. Joseph Mason and Bridget Bolster would both be at the house of Messrs. Round and Crook in Bedford Row, and that he could attend at that hour if it so pleased him. It certainly would so please him, he said to himself when he got that letter; and in the evening he mentioned to his new friend the business which was taking him to London.

"If I might advise you in the matter, Mr. Dockwrath," said Crabwitz, "I should stay away altogether."

"And why so?"

"Because that's not your market. This poor devil of a woman—for she is a poor devil of a woman——"

"She'll be poor enough before long."

"It can't be any gratification to you running her down."

"Ah, but the justice of the thing."

"Bother! You're talking now to a man of the world. Who can say what is the justice or the injustice of anything after twenty years of possession? I have no doubt the codicil did express the old man's wish,—

even from your own story. But of course you are looking for your market. Now it seems to me that there's a thousand pounds in your way as clear as daylight."

"I don't see it myself, Mr. Cooke."

"No; but I do. The sort of thing is done every day. You have your father-in-law's office journal?"

"Safe enough."

"Burn it;—or leave it about in these rooms, like;—so that somebody else may burn it."

"I'd like to see the thousand pounds first."

"Of course you'd do nothing till you knew about that;—nothing except keeping away from Round and Crook to-morrow. The money would be forthcoming if the trial were notoriously dropped by next assizes."

Dockwrath sat thinking for a minute or two, and every moment of thought made him feel more strongly that he could not now succeed in the manner pointed out by Mr. Cooke. "But where would be the market you are talking of?" said he.

"I could manage that," said Crabwitz.

"And go shares in the business?"

"No, no; nothing of the sort." And then he added, remembering that he must show that he had some personal object, "If I got a trifle in the matter it would not come out of your allowance."

The attorney again sat silent for a while, and now he remained so for full five minutes, during which Mr. Crabwitz puffed the smoke from between his lips with a look of supreme satisfaction. "May I ask," at last Mr. Dockwrath said, "whether you have any personal interest in this matter?"

"None in the least;—that is to say, none as yet."

"You did not come down here with any view——"

"Oh dear no; nothing of the sort. But I see at a

glance that it is one of those cases in which a compromise would be the most judicious solution of difficulties. I am well used to this kind of thing, Mr. Dockwrath."

"It would not do, Sir," said Mr. Dockwrath, after some further slight period of consideration. "It wouldn't do. Round and Crook have all the dates, and so has Mason too. And the original of that partnership deed is forthcoming; and they know what witnesses to depend on. No, Sir; I've begun this on public grounds, and I mean to carry it on. I am in a manner bound to do so as the representative of the attorney of the late Sir Joseph Mason;—and, by Heavens, Mr. Cooke, I'll do my duty."

"I dare say you're right," said Mr. Crabwitz, mixing a quarter of a glass more brandy and water.

"I know I'm right, Sir," said Dockwrath. "And when a man knows he's right, he has a deal of inward satisfaction in the feeling." After that Mr. Crabwitz was aware that he could be of no use at Hamworth, but he stayed out his week in order to avoid suspicion.

On the following day Mr. Dockwrath did proceed to Bedford Row, determined to carry out his original plan, and armed with that inward satisfaction to which he had alluded. He dressed himself in his best, and endeavoured as far as was in his power to look as though he were equal to the Messrs. Round. Old Crook he had seen once, and him he already despised. He had endeavoured to obtain a private interview with Mrs. Bolster before she could be seen by Matthew Round; but in this he had not succeeded. Mrs. Bolster was a prudent woman, and, acting doubtless under advice, had written to him saying that she had been summoned to the office of Messrs. Round and Crook,

and would there declare all that she knew about the matter. At the same time she returned to him a money order which he had sent to her.

Punctually at twelve he was in Bedford Row, and there he saw a respectable-looking female sitting at the fire in the inner part of the outer office. This was Bridget Bolster, but he would by no means have recognised her. Bridget had risen in the world and was now head chambermaid at a large hotel in the west of England. In that capacity she had laid aside whatever diffidence may have afflicted her earlier years, and now was able to speak out her mind before any judge or jury in the land. Indeed she had never been much afflicted by such diffidence, and had spoken out her evidence on that former occasion, now twenty years since, very plainly. But as she now explained to the head clerk, she had at that time been only a poor ignorant slip of a girl, with no more than eight pounds a year wages.

Dockwrath bowed to the head clerk, and passed on to Mat. Round's private room. "Mr. Matthew is inside, I suppose," said he, and hardly waiting for permission he knocked at the door, and then entered. There he saw Mr. Matthew Round, sitting in his comfortable arm-chair, and opposite to him sat Mr. Mason of Groby Park.

Mr. Mason got up and shook hands with the Hamworth attorney, but Round junior made his greeting without rising, and merely motioned his visitor to a chair.

"Mrs. Mason and the young ladies are quite well, I hope?" said Mr. Dockwrath, with a smile.

"Quite well, I thank you," said the county magistrate.

"This matter has progressed since I last had the pleasure of seeing them. You begin to think I was right; eh, Mr. Mason?"

"Don't let us triumph till we are out of the wood," said Mr. Round. "It is a deal easier to spend money in such an affair as this than it is to make money by it. However, we shall hear to-day more about it."

"I do not know about making money," said Mr. Mason, very solemnly. "But that I have been robbed by that woman out of my just rights in that estate for the last twenty years,—that I may say I do know."

"Quite true, Mr. Mason; quite true," said Mr. Dockwrath with considerable energy.

"And whether I make money or whether I lose money, I intend to proceed in this matter. It is dreadful to think that in this free and enlightened country so abject an offender should have been able to hold her head up so long without punishment and without disgrace."

"That is exactly what I feel," said Dockwrath. "The very stones and trees of Hamworth cry out against her."

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Round, "we have first to see whether there has been any injustice or not. If you will allow me I will explain to you what I now propose to do."

"Proceed, Sir," said Mr. Mason, who was by no means satisfied with his young attorney.

"Bridget Bolster is now in the next room, and as far as I can understand the case at present, she would be the witness on whom your case, Mr. Mason, would most depend. The man Kenneby I have not yet seen; but from what I understand he is less likely to prove a willing witness than Mrs. Bolster."

"I cannot go along with you there, Mr. Round," said Dockwrath.

"Excuse me, Sir, but I am only stating my opinion. If I should find that this woman is unable to say that she did not sign two separate documents on that day—that is, to say so with a positive and point blank assurance, I shall recommend you, as my client, to drop the prosecution."

"I will never drop it," said Mr Mason.

"You will do as you please," continued Round; "I can only say what under such circumstances will be the advice given to you by this firm. I have talked the matter over very carefully with my father and with our other partner, and we shall not think well of going on with it unless I shall now find that your view is strongly substantiated by this woman."

Then outspoke Mr. Dockwrath. "Under these circumstances, Mr. Mason, if I were you, I should withdraw from the house at once. I certainly would not have my case blown upon."

"Mr. Mason, Sir, will do as he pleases about that. As long as the business with which he honours us is straightforward, we will do it for him, as for an old client, although it is not exactly in our own line. But we can only do it in accordance with our own judgment. I will proceed to explain what I now propose to do. The woman Bolster is in the next room, and I, with the assistance of my head clerk, will take down the headings of what evidence she can give."

"In our presence, Sir," said Mr. Dockwrath; "or if Mr. Mason should decline, at any rate in mine."

"By no means, Mr. Dockwrath," said Round.

"I think Mr. Dockwrath should hear her story," said Mr. Mason.

"He certainly will not do so in this house or in conjunction with me. In what capacity should he be present, Mr. Mason?"

"As one of Mr. Mason's legal advisers," said Dockwrath.

"If you are to be one of them, Messrs. Round and Crook cannot be the other. I think I explained that to you before. It now remains for Mr. Mason to say whether he wishes to employ our firm in this matter or not. And I can tell him fairly," Mr. Round added this after a slight pause, "that we shall be rather pleased than otherwise if he will put the case into other hands."

"Of course I wish you to conduct it," said Mr. Mason, who, with all his bitterness against the present holders of Orley Farm, was afraid of throwing himself into the hands of Dockwrath. He was not an ignorant man, and he knew that the firm of Round and Crook bore a high reputation before the world.

"Then," said Round, "I must do my business in accordance with my own views of what is right. I have reason to believe that no one has yet tampered with this woman," and as he spoke he looked hard at Dockwrath, "though probably attempts may have been made."

"I don't know who should tamper with her," said Dockwrath, "unless it be Lady Mason—whom I must say you seem very anxious to protect."

"Another word like that, Sir, and I shall be compelled to ask you to leave the house. I believe that this woman has been tampered with by no one. I will now learn from her what is her remembrance of the circumstances as they occurred twenty years since, and I will then read to you her deposition. I shall be sorry,

gentlemen, to keep you here, perhaps for an hour or so, but you will find the morning papers on the table." And then Mr. Round, gathering up certain documents, passed into the outer office, and Mr. Mason and Mr. Dockwrath were left alone.

"He is determined to get that woman off," said Mr. Dockwrath in a whisper.

"I believe him to be an honest man," said Mr. Mason, with some sternness.

"Honesty, Sir! It is hard to say what is honesty and what is dishonesty. Would you believe it, Mr. Mason, only last night I had a thousand pounds offered me to hold my tongue about this affair?"

Mr. Mason at the moment did not believe this, but he merely looked hard into his companion's face and said nothing.

"By the heavens above us what I tell you is true! a thousand pounds, Mr. Mason! Only think how they are going it to get this thing stifled. And where should the offer come from but from those who know I have the power?"

"Do you mean to say that the offer came from this firm?"

"Hush—sh, Mr. Mason. The very walls hear and talk in such a place as this. I'm not to know who made the offer, and I don't know. But a man can give a very good guess sometimes. The party who was speaking to me is up to the whole transaction, and knows exactly what is going on here—here, in this house. He let it all out, using pretty nigh the same words as Round used just now. He was full about the doubt that Round and Crook felt—that they'd never pull it through. I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Mason, they don't mean to pull it through."

"What answer did you make to the man?"

"What answer! why I just put my thumb this way over my shoulder. No, Mr. Mason, if I can't carry on without bribery and corruption, I won't carry on at all. He'd called at the wrong house with that dodge, and so he soon found."

"And do you think he was an emissary from Messrs. Round and Crook?"

"Hush—sh—sh. For Heaven's sake, Mr. Mason, do be a little lower. You can put two and two together as well as I can, Mr. Mason. I find they make four. I don't know whether your calculation will be the same. My belief is, that these people are determined to save that woman. Don't you see it in that young fellow's eye—that his heart is all on the other side? Now he's got hold of that woman Bolster, and he'll teach her to give such evidence as will upset us. But I'll be even with him yet, Mr. Mason. If you'll only trust me, we'll both be even with him yet."

Mr. Mason at the present moment said nothing further, and when Dockwrath pressed him to continue the conversation in whispers, he distinctly said that he would rather say no more upon the subject just then. He would wait for Mr. Round's return. "Am I at liberty," he asked, "to mention that offer of the thousand pounds?"

"What—to Mat. Round?" said Dockwrath. "Certainly not, Mr. Mason. It wouldn't be our game at all."

"Very well, Sir." And then Mr. Mason took up a newspaper, and no further words were spoken till the door opened and Mr. Round re-entered the room.

This he did with slow, deliberate step, and stopping on the hearth-rug, he stood leaning with his back against the mantelpiece. It was clear from his face to

see that he had much to tell, and clear also that he was not pleased at the turn which affairs were taking.

"Well, gentlemen, I have examined the woman," he said, "and here is her deposition."

"And what does she say?" asked Mr. Mason.

"Come, out with it, Sir," said Dockwrath. "Did she, or did she not, sign two documents on that day?"

"Mr. Mason," said Round, turning to that gentleman, and altogether ignoring Dockwrath and his question; "I have to tell you that her statement, as far as it goes, fully corroborates your view of the case. As far as it goes, mind you."

"Oh, it does; does it?" said Dockwrath.

"And she is the only important witness?" said Mr. Mason with great exultation.

"I have never said that; what I did say was this—that your case must break down unless her evidence supported it. It does support it—strongly; but you will want more than that."

"And now, if you please, Mr. Round, what is it that she has deposed?" asked Dockwrath.

"She remembers it all, then?" said Mason.

"She is a remarkably clear-headed woman, and apparently does remember a great deal. But her remembrance chiefly and most strongly goes to this—that she witnessed only one deed."

"She can prove that, can she?" said Mason, and the tone of his voice was loudly triumphant.

"She declares that she never signed but one deed in the whole of her life—either on that day or on any other; and over and beyond this she says now—now that I have explained to her what that other deed might have been—that old Mr. Usbech told her that it was about a partnership."

"He did, did he?" said Dockwrath, rising from his chair and clapping his hands. "Very well. I don't think we shall want more than that, Mr. Mason."

There was a tone of triumph in the man's voice, and a look of gratified malice in his countenance, which disgusted Mr. Round and irritated him almost beyond his power of endurance. It was quite true that he would much have preferred to find that the woman's evidence was in favour of Lady Mason. He would have been glad to learn that she actually had witnessed the two deeds on the same day. His tone would have been triumphant, and his face gratified, had he returned to the room with such tidings. His feelings were all on that side, though his duty lay on the other. He had almost expected that it would be so. As it was, he was prepared to go on with his duty, but he was not prepared to endure the insolence of Mr. Dockwrath. There was a look of joy also about Mr. Mason which added to his annoyance. It might be just and necessary to prosecute that unfortunate woman at Orley Farm, but he could not gloat over such work.

"Mr. Dockwrath," he said, "I will not put up with such conduct here. If you wish to rejoice about this, you must go elsewhere."

"And what are we to do now?" said Mr. Mason. "I presume there need be no further delay."

"I must consult with my partner. If you can make it convenient to call this day week——"

"But she will escape."

"No, she will not escape. I shall not be ready to say anything before that. If you are not in town, then I can write to you." And so the meeting was broken up, and Mr. Mason and Mr. Dockwrath left the lawyer's office together.

Mr. Mason and Mr. Dockwrath left the office in Bedford Row together, and thus it was almost a necessity that they should walk together for some distance through the streets. Mr. Mason was going to his hotel in Soho Square, and Mr. Dockwrath turned with him through the passage leading into Red Lion Square, linking his own arm in that of his companion. The Yorkshire county magistrate did not like this, but what was he to do?

"Did you ever see anything like that, Sir?" said Mr. Dockwrath; "for by Heavens I never did."

"Like what?" said Mr. Mason.

"Like that fellow there;—that Round. It is my opinion that he deserves to have his name struck from the rolls. Is it not clear that he is doing all in his power to bring that wretched woman off? And I'll tell you what, Mr. Mason, if you let him play his own game in that way, he will bring her off."

"But he expressly admitted that this woman Bolster's evidence is conclusive."

"Yes; he was so driven into a corner that he could not help admitting that. The woman had been too many for him, and he found that he couldn't cushion her. But do you mind my words, Mr. Mason. He intends that you shall be beaten. It's as plain as the nose on your face. You can read it in the very look of him, and in every tone of his words. At any rate I can. I'll tell you what it is"—and then he squeezed very close to Mr. Mason—"he and old Furnival understand each other in this matter like two brothers. Of course Round will have his bill against you. Win or lose, he'll get his costs out of your pocket. But he can make a deuced pretty thing out of the other side as well. Let me tell you, Mr. Mason, that when notes for a thousand

pounds are flying here and there, it isn't every lawyer that will see them pass by him without opening his hand."

"I do not think that Mr. Round would take a bribe," said Mr. Mason very stiffly.

"Wouldn't he? Just as a hound would a pat of butter. It's your own look-out, you know, Mr. Mason. I haven't got an estate of twelve hundred a year depending on it. But remember this;—if she escapes now, Orley Farm is gone for ever."

All this was extremely disagreeable to Mr. Mason. In the first place he did not at all like the tone of equality which the Hamworth attorney had adopted; he did not like to acknowledge that his affairs were in any degree dependent on a man of whom he thought so badly as he did of Mr. Dockwrath; he did not like to be told that Round and Crook were rogues,—Round and Crook, whom he had known all his life; but least of all did he like the feeling of suspicion with which, in spite of himself, this man had imbued him, or the fear that his victim might at last escape him. Excellent, therefore, as had been the evidence with which Bridget Bolster had declared herself ready to give in his favour, Mr. Mason was not a contented man when he sat down to his solitary beefsteak in Soho Square.

CHAPTER VI

THE ANGEL OF LIGHT

IN speaking of the character and antecedents of Felix Graham I have said that he was moulding a wife for himself. The idea of a wife thus moulded to fit a man's own grooves, and educated to suit matrimonial purposes according to the exact views of the future husband was by no means original with him. Other men have moulded their wives, but I do not know that as a rule the practice has been found to answer. It is open, in the first place, to this objection,—that the moulder does not generally conceive such idea very early in life, and the idea when conceived must necessarily be carried out on a young subject. Such a plan is the result of much deliberate thought, and has generally arisen from long observation, on the part of the thinker, of the unhappiness arising from marriages in which there has been no moulding. Such a frame of mind comes upon a bachelor, perhaps about his thirty-fifth year, and then he goes to work with a girl of fourteen. The operation takes some ten years, at the end of which the moulded bride regards her lord as an old man. On the whole I think that the ordinary plan is the better, and even the safer. Dance with a girl three times, and if you like the light of her eye and the tone of voice with which she, breathless, answers your little questions about horseflesh and music—about affairs masculine and feminine,—then take the leap in the dark. There is

danger, no doubt; but the moulded wife is, I think, more dangerous.

With Felix Graham the matter was somewhat different, seeing that he was not yet thirty, and that the lady destined to be the mistress of his family had already passed through three or four years of her novitiate. He had begun to be prudent early in life; or had become prudent rather by force of sentiment than by force of thought. Mary Snow was the name of his bride-elect; and it is probable that, had not circumstances thrown Mary Snow in his way, he would not have gone out of his way to seek a subject for his experiment. Mary Snow was the daughter of an engraver,—not of an artist who receives four or five thousand pounds for engraving the chef-d'œuvre of a modern painter,—but of a man who executed flourishes on ornamental cards for tradespeople, and assisted in the illustration of circus playbills. With this man Graham had become acquainted through certain transactions of his with the press, and had found him to be a widower, drunken, dissolute, and generally drowned in poverty. One child the man had, and that child was Mary Snow.

How it came to pass that the young barrister first took upon himself the charge of maintaining and educating this poor child need not now be told. His motives had been thoroughly good, and in the matter he had endeavoured to act the part of a kind Samaritan. He had found her pretty, half starved, dirty, ignorant, and modest; and so finding her had made himself responsible for feeding, cleaning, and teaching her,—and ultimately for marrying her. One would have said that in undertaking a task of such undoubted charity as that comprised in the three first charges, he would have

encountered no difficulty from the drunken, dissolute, impoverished engraver. But the man from the beginning was cunning; and before Graham had succeeded in obtaining the custody of the child, the father had obtained a written undertaking from him that he would marry her at a certain age if her conduct up to that age had been becoming. As to this latter stipulation no doubt had arisen; and indeed Graham had so acted by her that had she fallen away the fault would have been all her own. There wanted now but one year to the coming of that day on which he was bound to make himself a happy man, and hitherto he himself had never doubted as to the accomplishment of his undertaking.

He had told his friends,—those with whom he was really intimate, Augustus Staveley and one or two others,—what was to be his matrimonial lot in life; and they had ridiculed him for his quixotic chivalry. Staveley especially had been strong in his conviction that no such marriage would ever take place, and had already gone so far as to plan another match for his friend.

“You know you do not love her,” he had said, since Felix had been staying on this occasion at Noningsby.

“I know no such thing,” Felix had answered, almost in anger. “On the contrary I know that I love her.”

“Yes, as I love my niece Maria, or old Aunt Bessy, who always supplied me with sugar-candy when I was a boy.”

“It is I that have supplied Mary with her sugar-candy, and the love thus engendered is the stronger.”

“Nevertheless you are not in love with her, and never will be, and if you marry her you will commit a great sin.”

“How moral you have grown!”

"No, I'm not. I'm not a bit moral. But I know very well when a man is in love with a girl, and I know very well that you're not in love with Mary Snow. And I tell you what, my friend, if you do marry her you are done for life. There will absolutely be an end of you."

"You mean to say that your royal highness will drop me."

"I mean to say nothing about myself. My dropping you or not dropping you won't alter your lot in life. I know very well what a poor man wants to give him a start; and a fellow like you who has such quaint ideas on so many things requires all the assistance he can get. You should look out for money and connection."

"Sophia Furnival, for instance."

"No; she would not suit you. I perceive that now."

"So I supposed. Well, my dear fellow, we shall not come to loggerheads about that. She is a very fine girl, and you are welcome to the hatful of money—if you can get it."

"That's nonsense. I'm not thinking of Sophia Furnival any more than you are. But if I did it would be a proper marriage. Now——" And then he went on with some further very sage remarks about Miss Snow.

All this was said as Felix Graham was lying with his broken bones in the comfortable room at Noningsby; and to tell the truth, when it was so said his heart was not quite at ease about Mary Snow. Up to this time, having long since made up his mind that Mary should be his wife, he had never allowed his thoughts to be diverted from that purpose. Nor did he so allow them now,—as long as he could prevent them from wandering.

But, lying there at Noningsby, thinking of those sweet Christmas evenings, how was it possible that they should not wander? His friend had told him that he did not love Mary Snow; and then, when alone, he asked himself whether in truth he did love her. He had pledged himself to marry her, and he must carry out that pledge. But nevertheless did he love her? And if not her, did he love any other?

Mary Snow knew very well what was to be her destiny, and indeed had known it for the last two years. She was now nineteen years old,—and Madeline Staveley was also nineteen; she was nineteen, and at twenty she was to become a wife, as by agreement between Felix Graham and Mr. Snow, the drunken engraver. They knew their destiny,—the future husband and the future wife,—and each relied with perfect faith on the good faith and affection of the other.

Graham, while he was thus being lectured by Staveley, had under his pillow a letter from Mary. He wrote to her regularly—on every Sunday, and on every Tuesday she answered him. Nothing could be more becoming than the way she obeyed all his behests on such matters; and it really did seem that in his case the moulded wife would turn out to have been well moulded. When Staveley left him he again read Mary's letter. Her letters were always of the same length, filling completely the four sides of a sheet of note paper. They were excellently well written; and as no word in them was ever altered or erased, it was manifest enough to Felix that the original composition was made on a rough draft. As he again read through the four sides of the little sheet of paper, he could not refrain from conjecturing what sort of a letter

Madeline Staveley might write. Mary Snow's letter ran as follows:—

“3, Bloomfield Terrace, Peckham,

“Tuesday, 10th January, 18—

“MY DEAREST FELIX” — she had so called him for the last twelve-month by common consent between Graham and the very discreet lady under whose charge she at present lived. Previously to that she had written to him as, My dear Mr. Graham.

“MY DEAREST FELIX,

“I am very glad to hear that your arm and your two ribs are getting so much better. I received your letter yesterday, and was glad to hear that you are so comfortable in the house of the very kind people with whom you are staying. If I knew them I would send them my respectful remembrances, but as I do not know them I suppose it would not be proper. But I remember them in my prayers.”—This last assurance was inserted under the express instruction of Mrs. Thomas, who however did not read Mary's letters, but occasionally, on some subjects, gave her hints as to what she ought to say. Nor was there hypocrisy in this, for under the instruction of her excellent mentor she had prayed for the kind people. — “I hope you will be well enough to come and pay me a visit before long, but pray do not come before you are well enough to do so without giving yourself any pain. I am glad to hear that you do not mean to go hunting any more, for it seems to me to be a dangerous amusement.” And then the first paragraph came to an end.

“My papa called here yesterday. He said he was very badly off indeed, and so he looked. I did not know what to say at first, but he asked me so much to

give him some money, that I did give him at last all that I had. It was nineteen shillings and sixpence. Mrs. Thomas was angry, and told me I had no right to give away your money, and that I should not have given more than half a crown. I hope you will not be angry with me. I do not want any more at present. But indeed he was very bad, especially about his shoes.

"I do not know that I have any more to say except that I put back thirty lines of *Telemaque* into French every morning before breakfast. It never comes near right, but nevertheless M. Grigaud says it is well done. He says that if it came quite right I should compose French as well as M. Fenelon, which of course I cannot expect.

"I will now say good-bye, and I am yours most affectionately,

"MARY SNOW."

There was nothing in this letter to give any offence to Felix Graham and so he acknowledged to himself. He made himself so acknowledge, because on the first reading of it he had felt that he was half angry with the writer. It was clear that there was nothing in the letter which would justify censure;—nothing which did not, almost, demand praise. He would have been angry with her had she limited her filial donation to the half-crown which Mrs. Thomas had thought appropriate. He was obliged to her for that attention to her French which he had especially enjoined. Nothing could be more proper than her allusion to the *Staveleys*;—and altogether the letter was just what it ought to be. Nevertheless it made him unhappy and irritated him.

Was it well that he should marry a girl whose father

was "indeed very bad, but especially about his shoes?" Staveley had told him that connection would be necessary for him, and what sort of a connection would this be? And was there one word in the whole letter that showed a spark of true love? Did not the footfall of Madeline Staveley's step as she passed along the passage go nearer to his heart than all the outspoken assurance of Mary Snow's letter?

Nevertheless he had undertaken to do this thing, and he would do it,—let the footfall of Madeline Staveley's step be ever so sweet in his ear. And then, lying back in his bed, he began to think whether it would have been as well that he should have broken his neck instead of his ribs in getting out of Monkton Grange covert

Mrs. Thomas was a lady who kept a school consisting of three little girls and Mary Snow. She had in fact not been altogether successful in the line of life she had chosen for herself, and had hardly been able to keep her modest door-plate on her door, till Graham, in search of some home for his bride, then in the first noviciate of her moulding, had come across her. Her means were now far from plentiful; but as an average number of three children still clung to her, and as Mary Snow's seventy pounds per annum—to include clothes—were punctually paid, the small house at Peckham was maintained. Under these circumstances Mary Snow was somebody in the eyes of Mrs. Thomas, and Felix Graham was a very great person indeed.

Graham had received his letter on a Wednesday, and on the following Monday Mary, as usual, received one from him. These letters always came to her in the evening, as she was sitting over her tea with Mrs. Thomas, the three children having been duly put to

bed. Graham's letters were very short, as a man with a broken right arm and two broken ribs is not fluent with his pen. But still a word or two did come to her. "Dearest Mary, I am doing better and better, and I hope I shall see you in about a fortnight. Quite right in giving the money. Stick to the French. Your own F. G." But as he signed himself her own, his mind misgave him that he was lying.

"It is very good of him to write to you while he is in such a state," said Mrs. Thomas.

"Indeed it is," said Mary—"very good indeed." And then she went on with the history of "Rasselas" in his happy valley, by which study Mrs. Thomas intended to initiate her into that course of novel-reading which has become necessary for a British lady. But Mrs. Thomas had a mind to improve the present occasion. It was her duty to inculcate in her pupil love and gratitude towards the beneficent man who was doing so much for her. Gratitude for favours past and love for favours to come; and now, while that scrap of a letter was lying on the table, the occasion for doing so was opportune.

"Mary, I do hope you love Mr. Graham with all your heart and all your strength." She would have thought it wicked to say more; but so far she thought she might go, considering the sacred tie which was to exist between her pupil and the gentleman in question.

"Oh, yes, indeed I do;" and then Mary's eyes fell wistfully on the cover of the book which lay in her lap while her finger kept the place. Rasselas is not very exciting, but it was more so than Mrs. Thomas.

"You would be very wicked if you did not. And I hope you think sometimes of the very responsible duties which a wife owes to her husband. And this will be

more especially so with you than with any other woman—almost that I ever heard of.”

There was something in this that was almost depressing to poor Mary’s spirit, but nevertheless she endeavoured to bear up against it and do her duty. “I shall do all I can to please him, Mrs. Thomas;—and indeed I do try about the French. And he says I was right to give papa that money.”

“But there will be many more things than that when you’ve stood at the altar with him and become his wife;—bone of his bone, Mary.” And she spoke these last words in a very solemn tone, shaking her head, and the solemn tone almost ossified poor Mary’s heart as she heard it.

“Yes, I know there will. But I shall endeavour to find out what he likes.”

“I don’t think he is so particular about his eating and drinking as some other gentlemen; though no doubt he will like his things nice.”

“I know he is fond of strong tea, and I sha’n’t forget that.”

“And about dress. He is not very rich, you know, Mary; but it will make him unhappy if you are not always tidy. And his own shirts—I fancy he has no one to look after them now, for I so often see the buttons off. You should never let one of them go into his drawers without feeling them all to see that they’re on tight.”

“I’ll remember that,” said Mary, and then she made another little furtive attempt to open the book.

“And about your own stockings, Mary. Nothing is so useful to a young woman in your position as a habit of darning neat. I’m sometimes almost afraid that you don’t like darning.”

"Oh, yes I do." That was a fib; but what could she do, poor girl, when so pressed?

"Because I thought you would look at Jane Robinson's and Julia Wright's which are lying there in the basket. I did Rebecca's myself before tea, till my old eyes were sore."

"Oh, I didn't know," said Mary, with some slight offence in her tone. "Why didn't you ask me to do them downright if you wanted?"

"It's only for the practice it will give you."

"Practice! I'm always practising something." But nevertheless she laid down the book, and dragged the basket of work up on to the table. "Why, Mrs. Thomas, it's impossible to mend these; they're all darn."

"Give them to me," said Mrs. Thomas. And then there was silence between them for a quarter of an hour, during which Mary's thoughts wandered away to the events of her future life. Would his stockings be so troublesome as these?

But Mrs. Thomas was at heart an honest woman, and as a rule was honest also in practice. Her conscience told her that Mr. Graham might probably not approve of this sort of practice for conjugal duties, and in spite of her failing eyes she resolved to do her duty. "Never mind them, Mary," said she. "I remember now that you were doing your own before dinner."

"Of course I was," said Mary sulkily. "And as for practice, I don't suppose he'll want me to do more of that than anything else."

"Well, dear, put them by." And Miss Snow did put them by, resuming *Rasselas* as she did so. Who darned the stockings of *Rasselas* and felt that the

buttons were tight on his shirts? What a happy valley must it have been if a bride expectant were free from all such cares as these!

"I suppose, Mary, it will be some time in the spring of next year." Mrs. Thomas was not reading, and therefore a little conversation from time to time was to her a solace.

"What will be, Mrs. Thomas?"

"Why, the marriage."

"I suppose it will. He told father it should be early in 18—, and I shall be past twenty then."

"I wonder where you'll go to live."

"I don't know. He has never said anything about that."

"I suppose not; but I'm sure it will be a long way away from Peckham." In answer to this Mary said nothing, but could not help wishing that it might be so. Peckham to her had not been a place bright with happiness, although she had become in so marked a way a child of good fortune. And then, moreover, she had a deep care on her mind with which the streets and houses and pathways of Peckham were closely connected.

It would be very expedient that she should go far, far away from Peckham when she had become, in actual fact, the very wife of Felix Graham.

"Miss Mary," whispered the red-armed maid of all work, creeping up to Mary's bedroom door, when they had all retired for the night, and whispered through the chink. "Miss Mary. I've somethink to say." And Mary opened the door. "I've got a letter from him;" and the maid of all work produced a little note enclosed in a green envelope.

"Sarah, I told you not," said Mary, looking very

stern and hesitating with her finger whether or no she would take the letter.

"But he did so beg and pray. Besides, Miss, as he says hisself he must have his answer. Any gen'leman, he says, 'as a right to a answer. And if you'd a seed him yourself I'm sure you'd have took it. He did look so nice with a blue and gold hankercher round his neck. He was a-going to the the-a-tre, he said."

"And who was going with him, Sarah?"

"Oh, no one. Only his mamma and sister, and them sort. He's all right—he is." And then Mary Snow did take the letter.

"And I'll come for the answer when you're settling the room after breakfast to-morrow?" said the girl.

"No; I don't know. I sha'n't send any answer at all. But, Sarah, for Heaven's sake, do not say a word about it!"

"Who, I? Laws love you, Miss. I wouldn't;—not for worlds of gold." And then Mary was left alone to read a second letter from a second suitor.

"Angel of light!" it began, "but cold as your own fair name." Poor Mary thought it was very nice and very sweet, and though she was so much afraid of it that she almost wished it away, yet she read it a score of times. Stolen pleasures always are sweet. She had not cared to read those two lines from her own betrothed lord above once, or at the most twice; and yet they had been written by a good man,—a man superlatively good to her, and written too with considerable pain.

She sat down all trembling to think of what she was doing; and then, as she thought, she read the letter again. "Angel of light, but cold as your own fair name." Alas, alas! it was very sweet to her!

CHAPTER VII

MR. FURNIVAL LOOKS FOR ASSISTANCE

"AND you think that nothing can be done down there?" said Mr. Furnival to his clerk, immediately after the return of Mr. Crabwitz from Hamworth to London.

"Nothing at all, Sir," said Mr. Crabwitz, with laconic significance.

"Well; I dare say not. If the matter could have been arranged at a reasonable cost, without annoyance to my friend Lady Mason, I should have been glad; but, on the whole, it will perhaps be better that the law should take its course. She will suffer a good deal, but she will be the safer for it afterwards.

"Mr. Furnival, I went so far as to offer a thousand pounds!"

"A thousand pounds! Then they'll think we're afraid of them."

"Not a bit more than they did before. Though I offered the money, he doesn't know the least that the offer came from our side. But I'll tell you what it is; Mr. Furnival——. I suppose I may speak my mind."

"Oh, yes! But remember this, Crabwitz; Lady Mason is no more in danger of losing the property than you are. It is a most vexatious thing, but there can be no doubt as to what the result will be."

"Well, Mr. Furnival,—I don't know."

"In such matters, I am tolerably well able to form an opinion."

"Oh, certainly!"

"And that's my opinion. Now I shall be very glad to hear yours."

"My opinion is this, Mr. Furnival, that Sir Joseph never made that codicil."

"And what makes you think so?"

"The whole course of the evidence. It's quite clear there was another deed executed that day, and witnessed by Bolster and Kenneby. Had there been two documents for them to witness, they would have remembered it so soon after the occurrence."

"Well, Crabwitz, I differ from you,—differ from you in toto. But keep your opinion to yourself, that's all. I've no doubt you did the best for us you could down at Hamworth, and I'm much obliged to you. You'll find we've got our hands quite full again,—almost too full." Then he turned round to his table, and to the papers upon it; whereupon, Crabwitz took the hint and left the room.

But when he had gone, Mr. Furnival again raised his eyes from the papers on the table, and leaning back in his chair, gave himself up to further consideration of the Orley Farm case. Crabwitz he knew was a sharp, clever man, and now the opinion formed by Crabwitz, after having seen this Hamworth attorney, tallied with his own opinion. Yes; it was his own opinion. He had never said as much, even to himself, with those inward words which a man uses when he assures himself of the result of his own thoughts; but he was aware that it was his own opinion. In his heart of hearts, he did believe that that codicil had been

fraudulently manufactured by his friend and client, Lady Mason.

Under these circumstances, what should he do? He had the handle of his pen between his teeth, as was his habit when he was thinking, and tried to bring himself to some permanent resolution.

How beautiful had she looked while she stood in Sir Peregrine's library, leaning on the old man's arm—how beautiful and how innocent! That was the form which his thoughts chiefly took. And then she had given him her hand, and he still felt the soft silken touch of her cool fingers. He would not be a man if he could desert a woman in such a strait. And such a woman! If even guilty, had she not expiated her guilt by deep sorrow? And then he thought of Mr. Mason of Groby Park; and he thought of Sir Peregrine's strong conviction, and of Judge Staveley's belief; and he thought also of the strong hold which public opinion and twenty years of possession would still give to the cause he favoured. He would still bring her through! Yes; in spite of her guilt, if she were guilty; on the strength of her innocency, if she were innocent; but on account of her beauty, and soft hand, and deep liquid eye. So at least he would have owned, could he have been honest enough to tell himself the whole truth.

But he must prepare himself for the battle in earnest. It was not as though he had been briefed in this case, and had merely to perform the duty for which he had been hired. He was to undertake the whole legal management of the affair. He must settle what attorney should have the matter in hand, and instruct that attorney how to re-instruct him, and how to re-instruct those other barristers who must necessarily be employed on the defence, in a case of such magnitude. He did

not yet know under what form the attack would be made; but he was nearly certain that it would be done in the shape of a criminal charge. He hoped that it might take the direct form of an accusation of forgery. The stronger and more venomous the charge made, the stronger also would be public opinion in favour of the accused, and the greater the chance of an acquittal. But if she were to be found guilty on any charge, it would matter little on what. Any such verdict of guilty would be utter ruin and obliteration of her existence.

He must consult with some one, and at last he made up his mind to go to his very old friend, Mr. Chaffanbrass. Mr. Chaffanbrass was safe, and he might speak out his mind to him without fear of damaging the cause. Not that he could bring himself to speak out his real mind, even to Mr. Chaffanbrass. He would so speak that Mr. Chaffanbrass should clearly understand him; but still, not even to his ears, would he say that he really believed Lady Mason to have been guilty. How would it be possible that he should feign before a jury his assured, nay, his indignant conviction of his client's innocence, if he had ever whispered to any one his conviction of her guilt?

On that same afternoon he sent to make an appointment with Mr. Chaffanbrass, and immediately after breakfast, on the following morning, had himself taken to that gentleman's chambers. The chambers of this great guardian of the innocence—or rather not-guiltiness of the public—were not in any so-called inn, but consisted of two gloomy, dark, panelled rooms in Ely Place. The course of our story, however, will not cause us to make many visits to Ely Place, and any closer description of them may be spared.

I have said that Mr. Chaffanbrass and Mr. Furnival were very old friends. So they were. They had known each other for more than thirty years, and each knew the whole history of the other's rise and progress in the profession; but any results of their friendship at present were but scanty. They might meet each other in the streets, perhaps, once in the year; and occasionally—but very seldom—might be brought together on subjects connected with their profession; as was the case when they travelled together down to Birmingham. As to meeting in each other's houses, or coming together for the sake of the friendship which existed,—the idea of doing so never entered the head of either of them.

All the world knows Mr. Chaffanbrass—either by sight or by reputation. Those who have been happy enough to see the face and gait of the man as, in years now gone, he used to lord it at the Old Bailey, may not have thought much of the privilege which was theirs.

But to those who have only read of him, and know of his deeds simply by their triumphs, he was a man very famous and worthy to be seen. “Look! that's Chaffanbrass. It was he who cross-examined —— at the Old Bailey, and sent him howling out of London, banished for ever into the wilderness.” “Where, where? Is that Chaffanbrass? What a dirty little man!”

To this dirty little man in Ely Place, Mr. Furnival now went in his difficulty. Mr. Furnival might feel himself sufficient to secure the acquittal of an innocent person, or even of a guilty person, under ordinary circumstances; but if any man in England could secure the acquittal of a guilty person under extraordinary circumstances, it would be Mr. Chaffanbrass. This

had been his special line of work for the last thirty years.

Mr. Chaffanbrass was a dirty little man; and when seen without his gown and wig, might at a first glance be thought insignificant. But he knew well how to hold his own in the world, and could maintain his opinion, unshaken, against all the judges in the land. "Well, Furnival, and what can I do for you?" he said, as soon as the member for the Essex Marshes was seated opposite to him. "It isn't often that the light of your countenance shines so far east as this. Somebody must be in trouble, I suppose?"

"Somebody is in trouble," said Furnival; and then he began to tell his story. Mr. Chaffanbrass listened almost in silence throughout. Now and then he asked a question by a word or two, expressing no opinion whatever as he did so; but he was satisfied to leave the talking altogether in the hands of his visitor till the whole tale was told. "Ah," he said then, "a clever woman!"

"An uncommonly sweet creature too," said Mr. Furnival.

"I dare say," said Mr. Chaffanbrass; and then there was a pause.

"And what can I do for you?" said Mr. Chaffanbrass.

"In the first place I should be very glad to have your advice, and then——. Of course I must lead in defending her,—unless it were well that I should put the case altogether in your hands."

"Oh no! don't think of that. I couldn't give the time to it. My heart is not in it, as yours is. Where will it be?"

"At Alston, I suppose."

"At the spring assizes. That will be——. Let me see; about the 10th of March."

"I should think we might get it postponed till the summer. Round is not at all hot about it?"

"Should we gain anything by that? If a prisoner be innocent why torment him by delay? He is tolerably sure of escape. If he be guilty, extension of time only brings out the facts the clearer. As far as my experience goes, the sooner a man is tried the better,—always."

"And you would consent to hold a brief?"

"Under you? Well; yes. I don't mind it at Alston. Anything to oblige an old friend. I never was proud, you know."

"And what do you think about it, Chaffanbrass?"

"Ah! that's the question."

"She must be pulled through. Twenty years of possession! Think of that."

"That's what Mason, the man down in Yorkshire, is thinking of. There's no doubt of course about that partnership deed?"

"I fear not. Round would not go on with it if that were not all true."

"It depends on those two witnesses, Furnival. I remember the case of old, though it was twenty years ago, and I had nothing to do with it. I remember thinking that Lady Mason was a very clever woman, and that Round and Crook were rather slow."

"He's a brute, is that fellow Mason, of Groby Park."

"A brute, is he? We'll get him into the box and make him say as much for himself. She's uncommonly pretty, isn't she?"

"She is a pretty woman."

"And interesting? It will all tell, you know. A widow with one son, isn't she?"

"Yes, and she has done her duty admirably since her husband's death. You will find too that she has the sympathies of all the best people in her neighbourhood. She is staying now at the house of Sir Peregrine Orme, who would do anything for her."

"Anything, would he?"

"And the Staveleys know her. The judge is convinced of her innocence."

"Is he? He'll probably have the Home Circuit in the summer. His conviction expressed from the bench would be more useful to her. You can make Staveley believe everything in a drawing-room or over a glass of wine; but I'll be hanged if I can ever get him to believe anything when he's on the bench."

"But, Chaffanbrass, the countenance of such people will be of great use to her down there. Everybody will know that she's been staying with Sir Peregrine."

"I've no doubt she's a clever woman."

"But this new trouble has half killed her."

"I don't wonder at that either. These sort of troubles do vex people. A pretty woman like that should have everything smooth; shouldn't she? Well, we'll do the best we can. You'll see that I'm properly instructed. By-the-bye, who is her attorney? In such a case as that you couldn't have a better man than old Solomon Aram. But Solomon Aram is too far east from you, I suppose?"

"Isn't he a Jew?"

"Upon my word I don't know. He's an attorney, and that's enough for me."

And then the matter was again discussed between them, and it was agreed that a third counsel would be

wanting. "Felix Graham is very much interested in the case," said Mr. Furnival, "and is as firmly convinced of her innocence as—as I am." And he managed to look his ally in the face and to keep his countenance firmly.

"Ah," said Mr. Chaffanbrass. "But what if he should happen to change his opinion about his own client?"

"We could prevent that, I think."

"I'm not so sure. And then he'd throw her over as sure as your name's Furnival."

"I hardly think he'd do that."

"I believe he'd do anything." And Mr. Chaffanbrass was quite moved to enthusiasm. "I've heard that man talk more nonsense about the profession in one hour, than I ever heard before since I first put a cotton gown on my back. He does not understand the nature of the duty which a professional man owes to his client."

"But he'd work well if he had a case at heart himself. I don't like him, but he is clever."

"You can do as you like, of course. I shall be out of my ground down at Alston, and of course I don't care who takes the fag of the work. But I tell you this fairly;—if he does go into the case and then turns against us or drops it,—I shall turn against him and drop into him."

"Heaven help him in such a case as that!" And then these two great luminaries of the law shook hands and parted.

One thing was quite clear to Mr. Furnival as he had himself carried in a cab from Ely Place to his own chambers in Lincoln's Inn. Mr. Chaffanbrass was fully convinced of Lady Mason's guilt. He had not

actually said so, but he had not even troubled himself to go through the little ceremony of expressing a belief in her innocence. Mr. Furnival was well aware that Mr. Chaffanbrass would not on this account be less likely to come out strongly with such assurances before a jury, or to be less severe in his cross-examination of a witness whose evidence went to prove that guilt; but nevertheless the conviction was disheartening. Mr. Chaffanbrass would know, almost by instinct, whether an accused person was or was not guilty; and he had already perceived, by instinct, that Lady Mason was guilty. Mr. Furnival sighed as he stepped out of his cab, and again wished that he could wash his hands of the whole affair. He wished it very much;—but he knew that his wish could not be gratified.

“Solomon Aram!” he said to himself, as he again sat down in his arm-chair. “It will sound badly to those people down at Alston. At the Old Bailey they don’t mind that kind of thing.” And then he made up his mind that Solomon Aram would not do. It would be a disgrace to him to take a case out of Solomon Aram’s hands. Mr. Chaffanbrass did not understand all this. Mr. Chaffanbrass had been dealing with Solomon Aram all his life. Mr. Chaffanbrass could not see the effect which such an alliance would have on the character of a barrister holding Mr. Furnival’s position. Solomon Aram was a good man in his way no doubt;—perhaps the best man going. In taking every dodge to prevent a conviction no man could be better than Solomon Aram. All this Mr. Furnival felt;—but he felt also that he could not afford it. “It would be tantamount to a confession of guilt to take such a man as that down into the country,” he said to himself, trying to excuse himself.

And then he also made up his mind that he would sound Felix Graham. If Felix Graham could be induced to take up the case thoroughly believing in the innocence of his client, no man would be more useful as a junior. Felix Graham went the Home Circuit on which Alston was one of the assize towns.

CHAPTER VIII

LOVE WAS STILL THE LORD OF ALL

WHY should I not? Such had been the question which Sir Peregrine Orme had asked himself over and over again, in these latter days, since Lady Mason had been staying at his house; and the purport of the question was this:—Why should he not make Lady Mason his wife?

I and my readers can probably see very many reasons why he should not do so; but then we are not in love with Lady Mason. Her charms and her sorrows,—her soft, sad smile and her more lovely tears have not operated upon us. We are not chivalrous old gentlemen, past seventy years of age, but still alive, keenly alive, to a strong feeling of romance. That visit will perhaps be remembered which Mr. Furnival made at The Cleeve, and the subsequent interview between Lady Mason and the baronet. On that day he merely asked himself the question, and took no further step. On the subsequent day and the day after, it was the same. He still asked himself the question, sitting alone in his library; but he did not ask it as yet of any one else. When he met Lady Mason in these days his manner to her was full of the deference due to a lady and of the affection due to a dear friend, but that was all. Mrs. Orme, seeing this, and cordially concurring in this love for her guest, followed the lead which her father-in-law gave, and threw herself into Lady Mason's arms. They two were fast and bosom friends.

And what did Lady Mason think of all this? In truth there was much in it that was sweet to her, but there was something also that increased that idea of danger which now seemed to envelop her whole existence. Why had Sir Peregrine so treated her in the library, behaving towards her with such tokens of close affection? He had put his arm round her waist and kissed her lips and pressed her to his old bosom. Why had this been so? He had assured her that he would be to her as a father, but her woman's instinct had told her that the pressure of his hand had been warmer than that which a father accords to his adopted daughter. No idea of anger had come upon her for a moment; but she had thought about it much, and had thought about it almost in dismay. What if the old man did mean more than a father's love? It seemed to her as though it must be a dream that he should do so; but what if he did? How should she answer him? In such circumstances what should she do or say? Could she afford to buy his friendship,—even his warmest love at the cost of the enmity of so many others? Would not Mrs. Orme hate her, Mrs. Orme, whom she truly, dearly, eagerly loved? Mrs. Orme's affection was, of all personal gratification, the sweetest to her. And the young heir,—would not he hate her? Nay, would he not interfere and with some strong hand prevent so mean a deed on the part of his grandfather? And if so, would she not thus have lost them altogether? And then she thought of that other friend whose aid would be so indispensable to her in this dreadful time of tribulation. How would Mr. Furnival receive such tidings, if it should come to pass that such tidings were to be told?

Lady Mason was rich with female charms, and she

used them partly with the innocence of the dove, but partly also with the wisdom of the serpent. But in such use as she did make of these only weapons which Providence had given to her, I do not think that she can be regarded as very culpable. During those long years of her young widowhood in which nothing had been wanting to her, her conduct had been free from any hint of reproach. She had been content to find all her joy in her duties and in her love as a mother. Now a great necessity for assistance had come upon her. It was necessary that she should bind men to her cause, men powerful in the world and able to fight her battle with strong arms. She did so bind them with the only chains at her command,—but she had no thought, nay, no suspicion of evil in so doing. It was very painful to her when she found that she had caused unhappiness to Mrs. Furnival; and it caused her pain now, also when she thought of Sir Peregrine's new love. She did wish to bind these men to her by a strong attachment! but she would have stayed this feeling at a certain point had it been possible for her so to manage it.

In the mean time Sir Peregrine still asked himself that question. He had declared to himself when first the idea had come to him, that none of those whom he loved should be injured. He would even ask his daughter-in-law's consent, condescending to plead his cause before her, making her understand his motives, and asking her acquiescence as a favour. He would be so careful of his grandson that this second marriage—if such event did come to pass—should not put a pound out of his pocket, or at any rate should not hamper the succession of the estate with a pound of debt. And then he made excuses to himself as to the step which he proposed to take, thinking how he would

meet his friends, and how he would carry himself before his old servants.

Old men have made more silly marriages than this which he then desired. Gentlemen such as Sir Peregrine in age and station have married their housemaids,—have married young girls of eighteen years of age,—have done so and faced their friends and servants afterwards. The bride that he proposed to himself was a lady, an old friend, a woman over forty, and one whom by such a marriage he could greatly assist in her deep sorrow. Why should he not do it?

After much of such thoughts as these, extended over nearly a week, he resolved to speak his mind to Mrs. Orme. If it were to be done it should be done at once. The incredulous unromantic readers of this age would hardly believe me if I said that his main object was to render assistance to Lady Mason in her difficulty; but so he assured himself, and so he believed. This assistance to be of true service must be given at once;—and having so resolved he sent for Mrs. Orme into the library.

“Edith, my darling,” he said, taking her hand and pressing it between both his own as was often the wont with him in his more affectionate moods. “I want to speak to you—on business that concerns me nearly; may perhaps concern us all nearly. Can you give me half an hour?”

“Of course I can—what is it, Sir? I am a bad hand at business; but you know that.”

“Sit down, dear; there; sit there, and I will sit here. As to this business, no one can counsel me as well as you.”

“Dearest father, I should be a poor counsellor in anything.”

"Not in this, Edith. It is about Lady Mason that I would speak to you. We both love her dearly; do we not?"

"I do."

"And are glad to have her here?"

"Oh, so glad. When this trial is only over, it will be so sweet to have her for a neighbour. We really know her now. And it will be so pleasant to see much of her."

There was nothing discouraging in this, but still the words in some slight degree grated against Sir Peregrine's feelings. At the present moment he did not wish to think of Lady Mason as living at Orley Farm, and would have preferred that his daughter-in-law should have spoken of her as being there, at The Cleeve.

"Yes; we know her now," he said. "And believe me in this, Edith; no knowledge obtained of a friend in happiness is at all equal to that which is obtained in sorrow. Had Lady Mason been prosperous, had she never become subject to the malice and avarice of wicked people, I should never have loved her as I do love her."

"Nor should I, father."

"She is a cruelly ill-used woman, and a woman worthy of the kindest usage. I am an old man now, but it has never before been my lot to be so anxious for a fellow-creature as I am for her. It is dreadful to think that innocence in this country should be subject to such attacks."

"Indeed it is; but you do not think that there is any danger?"

This was all very well, and showed that Mrs. Orme's mind was well disposed towards the woman he loved.

But he had known that before, and he began to feel that he was not approaching the object which he had in view. "Edith," at last he said, abruptly, "I love her with my whole heart. I would fain make her—my wife."

Sir Peregrine Orme had never in his course through life failed in anything for lack of courage; and when the idea came home to him that he was trembling at the task which he had imposed on himself, he dashed at it at once. It is so that forlorn hopes are led, and become not forlorn; it is so that breaches are taken.

"Your wife!" said Mrs. Orme. She would not have breathed a syllable to pain him if she could have helped it, but the suddenness of the announcement overcame her for a moment.

"Yes, Edith, my wife. Let us discuss the matter before you condemn it. But in the first place I would have you to understand this—I will not marry her if you say that it will make you unhappy. I have not spoken to her as yet, and she knows nothing of this project." Sir Peregrine, it may be presumed, had not himself thought much of that kiss which he had given her. "You," he continued to say, "have given up your whole life to me. You are my angel. If this thing will make you unhappy it shall not be done."

Sir Peregrine had not so considered it, but with such a woman as Mrs. Orme this was, of course, the surest way to overcome opposition. On her own behalf, thinking only of herself, she would stand in the way of nothing that could add to Sir Peregrine's happiness. But nevertheless the idea was strong in her mind that such a marriage would be imprudent. Sir Peregrine at present stood high before the world. Would he stand so high if he did this thing? His grey hair and old

manly bearing were honoured and revered by all who knew him. Would this still be so if he made himself the husband of Lady Mason? She loved so dearly, she valued so highly the honour that was paid to him! She was so proud of her own boy in that he was the grandson of so perfect a gentleman! Would not this be a sad ending to such a career? Such were the thoughts which ran through her mind at the moment.

"Make me unhappy!" she said, getting up and going over to him. "It is your happiness of which I would think. Will it make you more happy?"

"It will enable me to befriend her more effectually."

"But, dearest father, you must be the first consideration to us,—to me and Peregrine. Will it make you more happy?"

"I think it will," he answered slowly.

"Then I, for one, will say nothing against it," she answered. She was very weak, it will be said. Yes, she was weak. Many of the sweetest, kindest, best of women are weak in this way. It is not every woman that can bring herself to say hard, useful, wise words in opposition to the follies of those they love best. A woman to be useful and wise no doubt should have such power. For myself I am not so sure that I like useful and wise women. "Then I for one will say nothing against it," said Mrs. Orme, deficient in utility, wanting in wisdom, but full of the sweetest affection.

"You are sure that you will not love her the less yourself?" said Sir Peregrine.

"Yes; I am sure of that. If it were to be so, I should endeavour to love her the more."

"Dearest Edith. I have only one other person to tell."

"Do you mean Peregrine?" she said in her softest voice.

"Yes. Of course he must be told. But as it would not be well to ask his consent,—as I have asked yours——" and then as he said this she kissed his brow.

"But you will let him know it?"

"Yes; that is if she accepts my proposition. Then he shall know it immediately. And, Edith, my dear, you may be sure of this; nothing that I do shall be allowed in any way to injure his prospects or to hamper him as regards money when I am gone. If this marriage takes place I cannot do very much for her in the way of money; she will understand that. Something I can of course."

And then Mrs. Orme stood over the fire, looking at the hot coals, and thinking what Lady Mason's answer would be. She esteemed Lady Mason very highly, regarding her as a woman sensible and conscientious at all points, and she felt by no means certain that the offer would be accepted. What if Lady Mason should say that such an arrangement would not be possible for her? Mrs. Orme felt that under such circumstances she at any rate would not withdraw her love from Lady Mason.

"And now I may as well speak to her at once," said Sir Peregrine. "Is she in the drawing-room?"

"I left her there."

"Will you ask her to come to me—with my love?"

"I had better not say anything, I suppose?"

Sir Peregrine in his heart of hearts wished that his daughter-in-law could say it all, but he would not give her such a commission. "No; perhaps not." And then Mrs. Orme was going to leave him.

"One word more, Edith. You and I, darling, have

known each other so long and loved each other so well, that I should be unhappy if I were to fall in your estimation.”

“There is no fear of that, father.”

“Will you believe me when I assure you that my great object in doing this is to befriend a good and worthy woman whom I regard as ill used—beyond all ill usage of which I have hitherto known anything?”

She then assured him that she did so believe, and she assured him truly; after that she left him and went away to send in Lady Mason for her interview. In the mean time Sir Peregrine got up and stood with his back to the fire. He would have been glad that the coming scene could be over, and yet I should be wronging him to say that he was afraid of it. There would be a pleasure to him in telling her that he loved her so dearly and trusted her with such absolute confidence. There would be a sort of pleasure to him in speaking even of her sorrow, and in repeating his assurance that he would fight the battle for her with all the means at his command. And perhaps also there would be some pleasure in the downcast look of her eye, as she accepted the tender of his love. Something of that pleasure he had known already. And then he remembered the other alternative. It was quite upon the cards that she should decline his offer. He did not by any means shut his eyes to that. Did she do so, his friendship should by no means be withdrawn from her. He would be very careful from the onset that she should understand so much as that. And then he heard the light footsteps in the hall; the gentle hand was raised to the door, and Lady Mason was standing in the room.

“Dear Lady Mason,” he said, meeting her half way

across the room, "it is very kind of you to come to me when I send for you in this way."

"It would be my duty to come to you, if it were half across the kingdom;—and my pleasure also."

"Would it?" said he, looking into her face with all the wishfulness of a young lover. From that moment she knew what was coming. Strange as was the destiny which was to be offered to her at this period of her life, yet she foresaw clearly that the offer was to be made. What she did not foresee, what she could not foretell, was the answer which she might make to it!

"It would certainly be my sweetest pleasure to send for you if you were away from us,—to send for you or to follow you," said he.

"I do not know how to make return for all your kind regard to me;—to you and to dear Mrs. Orme."

"Call her Edith, will you not? You did so call her once."

"I call her so often when we are alone together, now; and yet I feel that I have no right."

"You have every right. You shall have every right if you will accept it. Lady Mason, I am an old man,—some would say a very old man. But I am not too old to love you. Can you accept the love of an old man like me?"

Lady Mason was, as we are aware, not taken in the least by surprise; but it was quite necessary that she should seem to be so taken. This is a little artifice which is excusable in almost any lady at such a period. "Sir Peregrine," she said, "you do not mean more than the love of a most valued friend?"

"Yes, much more. I mean the love of a husband for his wife; of a wife for her husband."

"Sir Peregrine! Ah me! You have not thought

of this, my friend. You have not remembered the position in which I am placed. Dearest, dearest friend; dearest of all friends,"—and then she knelt before him, leaning on his knees, as he sat in his accustomed large arm-chair. "It may not be so. Think of the sorrow that would come to you and yours, if my enemies should prevail."

"By —— they shall not prevail!" swore Sir Peregrine, roundly; and as he swore the oath he put his two hands upon her shoulders.

"No; we will hope not. I should die here at your feet if I thought that they could prevail. But I should die twenty deaths were I to drag you with me into disgrace. There will be disgrace even in standing at the bar."

"Who will dare to say so, when I shall stand there with you?" said Sir Peregrine.

There was a feeling expressed in his face as he spoke these words, which made it glorious, and bright, and beautiful. She, with her eyes laden with tears, could not see it; but nevertheless, she knew that it was bright and beautiful. And his voice was full of hot eager assurance,—that assurance which had the power to convey itself from one breast to another. Would it not be so? If he stood there with her as her husband and lord, would it not be the case that no one would dare to impute disgrace to her?

And yet she did not wish it. Even yet thinking of all this as she did think of it, according to the truth of the argument which he himself put before her, she would still have preferred that it should not be so. If she only knew with what words to tell him so;—to tell him so, and yet give no offence! For herself, she would have married him willingly. Why should she

not? Nay, she could and would have loved him, and been to him a wife, such as he could have found in no other woman. But she said within her heart that she owed him kindness and gratitude—that she owed them all kindness, and that it would be bad to repay them in such a way as this. She also thought of Sir Peregrine's grey hairs, and of his proud standing in the county, and the respect in which men held him. Would it be well in her to drag him down in his last days from the noble pedestal on which he stood, and repay him thus for all that he was doing for her?

“Well,” said he, stroking her soft hair with his hand—the hair which appeared in front of the quiet prim cap she wore, “shall it be so? Will you give me the right to stand there with you and defend you against the tongues of wicked men? We each have our own weakness, and we also have each our own strength. There I may boast that I should be strong.”

She thought again for a moment or two without rising from her knees, and also without speaking. Would such strength suffice? And if it did suffice, would it then be well with him? As for herself, she did love him. If she had not loved him before, she loved him now. Who had ever been to her so noble, so loving, so gracious as he? In her ears no young lover's vows had ever sounded. In her heart such love as all the world knows had never been known. Her former husband had been kind to her in his way, and she had done her duty by him carefully, painfully, and with full acceptance of her position. But there had been nothing there that was bright, and grand, and noble. She would have served Sir Peregrine on her knees in the smallest offices, and delighted in such services. It was not for lack of love that she must

refuse him. But still she did not answer him, and still he stroked her hair.

"It would be better that you had never seen me," at last she said; and she spoke with truth the thought of her mind. That she must do his bidding, whatever that bidding might be, she had in a certain way acknowledged to herself. If he would have it so, so it must be. How could she refuse him anything, or be disobedient in aught to one to whom she owed so much? But still it would be wiser otherwise; wiser for all—unless it were for herself alone. "It would be better that you had never seen me," she said.

"Nay, not so, dearest. That it would not be better for me,—for me and Edith, I am quite sure. And I would fain hope that for you——"

"Oh, Sir Peregrine! you know what I mean. You know how I value your kindness. What should I be if it were withdrawn from me?"

"It shall not be withdrawn. Do not let that feeling actuate you. Answer me out of your heart, and however your heart may answer, remember this, that my friendship and support shall be the same. If you will take me for your husband, as your husband will I stand by you. If you cannot,—then I will stand by you as your father."

What could she say? A word or two she did speak as to Mrs. Orme and her feelings, delaying her absolute reply—and as to Peregrine Orme and his prospects; but on both, as on all other points, the baronet was armed with his answer. He had spoken to his darling Edith, and she had gladly given her consent. To her it would be everything to have so sweet a friend. And then as to his heir, every care should be taken that no injury should be done to him; and speaking of this, Sir

Peregrine began to say a few words, plaintively, about money. But then Lady Mason stopped him. "No," she said, "she could not, and would not listen to that. She would have no settlement. No consideration as to money should be made to weigh with her. It was in no degree for that——" And then she wept there till she would have fallen had he not supported her.

What more is there to be told? Of course she accepted him. As far as I can see into such affairs no alternative was allowed to her. She also was not a wise woman at all points. She was one whose feelings were sometimes too many for her, and whose feelings on this occasion had been much too many for her. Had she been able to throw aside from her his offer, she would have done so; but she had felt that she was not able. "If you wish it, Sir Peregrine," she said at last.

"And can you love an old man?" he had asked. Old men sometimes will ask questions such as these. She did not answer him, but stood by his side; and then again he kissed her, and was happy.

He resolved from that moment that Lady Mason should no longer be regarded as the widow of a city knight, but as the wife elect of a country baronet. Whatever ridicule he might incur in this matter, he would incur at once. Men and women had dared to speak of her cruelly, and they should now learn that any such future speech would be spoken of one who was exclusively his property. Let any who chose to be speakers under such circumstances look to it. He had devoted himself to her that he might be her knight and bear her scathless through the fury of this battle. With God's help he would put on his armour at once for that fight. Let them who would now injure her look to it. As soon as might be she should bear his name; but all

the world should know at once what was her right to claim his protection. He had never been a coward, and he would not now be guilty of the cowardice of hiding his intentions. If there were those who chose to smile at the old man's fancy, let them smile. There would be many, he knew, who would not understand an old man's honour and an old man's chivalry.

"My own one," he then said, pressing her again to his side, "will you tell Edith, or shall I? She expects it." But Lady Mason begged that he would tell the tale. It was necessary, she said, that she should be alone for a while. And then, escaping, she went to her own chamber.

"Ask Mrs. Orme if she will kindly step to me," said Sir Peregrine, having rang his bell for the servant.

Lady Mason escaped across the hall to the stairs, and succeeded in reaching her room without being seen by any one. Then she sat herself down, and began to look her future world in the face. Two questions she had to ask. Would it be well for her that this marriage should take place? and would it be well for him? In an off-hand way she had already answered both questions; but she had done so by feeling rather than by thought.

No doubt she would gain much in the coming struggle by such a position as Sir Peregrine would give her. It did seem to her that Mr. Dockwrath and Joseph Mason would hardly dare to bring such a charge as that threatened against the wife of Sir Peregrine Orme. And then, too, what evidence as to character would be so substantial as the evidence of such a marriage? But how would Mr. Furnival bear it, and if he were offended would it be possible that the fight should be fought without him? No; that would be impossible. The lawyer's knowledge, expe-

rience, and skill were as necessary to her as the baronet's position and character. But why should Mr. Furnival be offended by such a marriage? "She did not know," she said to herself. "She could not see that there should be cause of offence." But yet some inner whisper of her conscience told her that there would be offence. Must Mr. Furnival be told; and must he be told at once?

And then what would Lucius say and think, and how should she answer the strong words which her son would use to her? He would use strong words she knew, and would greatly dislike this second marriage of his mother. What grown-up son is ever pleased to hear that his mother is about to marry? The Cleeve must be her home now—that is, if she did this deed. The Cleeve must be her home, and she must be separated in all things from Orley Farm. As she thought of this her mind went back, and back to those long gone days in which she had been racked with anxiety that Orley Farm should be the inheritance of the little baby that was lying at her feet. She remembered how she had pleaded to the father, pointing out the rights of her son—declaring, and with justice, that for herself she had asked nothing; but that for him—instead of asking might she not demand? Was not that other son provided for, and those grown-up women with their rich husbands? "Is he not your child as well as they?" she had pleaded. "Is he not your own, and as well worthy of your love?" She had succeeded in getting the inheritance for the baby at her feet;—but had his having it made her happy, or him? Then her child had been all in all to her; but now she felt that that child was half estranged from her about this very property, and would become wholly estranged by

the method she was taking to secure it! "I have toiled for him," she said to herself, "rising up early, and going to bed late; but the thief cometh in the night and despoileth it." Who can guess the bitterness of her thoughts as she said this?

But her last thoughts, as she sat there thinking, were of him—Sir Peregrine. Would it be well for him that he should do this? And in thus considering she did not turn her mind chiefly to the usual view in which such a marriage would be regarded. Men might call Sir Peregrine an old fool and laugh at him; but for that she would, with God's help make him amends. In those matters, he could judge for himself; and should he judge it right thus to link his life to hers, she would be true and leal to him in all things.

But then, about this trial. If there came disgrace and ruin, and an utter overthrow? If——? Would it not be well at any rate that no marriage should take place till that had been decided? She could not find it in her heart to bring down his old grey hairs with utter sorrow to the grave.

CHAPTER IX

WHAT THE YOUNG MEN THOUGHT ABOUT IT

LUCIUS MASON at this time was living at home at Orley Farm, not by any means in a happy frame of mind. It will be perhaps remembered that he had at one time had an interview with Mr. Furnival in that lawyer's chambers, which was by no means consoling to him, seeing that Mr. Furnival had pooh-poohed him and his pretensions in a very off-hand way; and he had since paid a very memorable visit to Mr. Dockwrath in which he had already been more successful. Nevertheless, he had gone to another lawyer. He had felt it impossible to remain tranquil, pursuing the ordinary avocations of his life, while such dreadful charges were being made openly against his mother, and being so made without any authorised contradiction. He knew that she was innocent. No doubt on that matter ever perplexed his mind for a moment. But why was she such a coward that she would not allow him to protect her innocence in the only way which the law permitted? He could hardly believe that he had no power of doing so even without her sanction; and therefore he went to another lawyer.

The other lawyer did him no good. It was not practicable that he, the son, should bring an action for defamatory character on the part of the mother, without that mother's sanction. Moreover, as this new lawyer saw in a moment, any such interference on the part of Lucius, and any interposition of fresh and new

legal proceedings would cripple and impede the advisers to whom Lady Mason had herself confided her own case. The new lawyer could do nothing, and thus Lucius, again repulsed, betook himself to Orley Farm in no happy frame of mind.

For some day or two after this he did not see his mother. He would not go down to The Cleeve, though they sent up and asked him; and she was almost afraid to go across to the house and visit him. "He will be in church on Sunday," she had said to Mrs. Orme. But he was not in church on Sunday, and then on Sunday afternoon she did go to him. This, it will be understood, was before Sir Peregrine had made his offer, and therefore as to that, there was as yet no embarrassment on the widow's mind.

"I cannot help feeling, mother," he said, after she had sat there with him for a short time, "that for the present there is a division between you and me."

"Oh, Lucius!"

"It is no use our denying it to ourselves. It is so. You are in trouble, and you will not listen to my advice. You leave my house and take to the roof of a new and untried friend."

"No, Lucius; not that."

"Yes. I say a new friend. Twelve months ago, though you might call there, you never did more than that—and even that but seldom. They are new friends: and yet, now that you are in trouble, you choose to live with them."

"Dear Lucius, is there any reason why I should not visit at The Cleeve?"

"Yes; if you ask me—yes;" and now he spoke very sternly. "There is a cloud upon you, and you should know nothing of visitings and of new friendships till

that cloud has been dispersed. While these things are being said of you, you should sit at no other table than this, and drink of no man's cup but mine. I know your innocence," and as he went on to speak, he stood up before her and looked down fully into her face, "but others do not. I know how unworthy are these falsehoods with which wicked men strive to crush you, but others believe that they are true accusations. They cannot be disregarded, and now it seems,—now that you have allowed them to gather to a head, they will result in a trial, during which you will have to stand at the bar charged with a dreadful crime."

"Oh, Lucius!" and she hid her eyes in her hands. "I could not have helped it. How could I have helped it?"

"Well; it must be so now. And till that trial is over, here should be your place. Here, at my right hand; I am he who am bound to stand by you. It is I whose duty it is to see that your name be made white again, though I spend all I have, ay, and my life in doing it. I am the one man on whose arm you have a right to lean. And yet in such days as these, you leave my house and go to that of a stranger."

"He is not a stranger, Lucius."

"He cannot be to you as a son should be. However, it is for you to judge. I have no control in this matter, but I think it right that you should know what are my thoughts."

And then she had crept back again to The Cleeve. Let Lucius say what he might, let this additional sorrow be ever so bitter, she could not obey her son's behests. If she did so in one thing she must do so in all. She had chosen her advisers with her best discretion and by that choice she must abide—even though it separated

her from her son. She could not abandon Sir Peregrine Orme and Mr. Furnival. So she crept back and told all this to Mrs. Orme. Her heart would have utterly sunk within her could she not have spoken openly to some one of this sorrow.

"But he loves you," Mrs. Orme had said, comforting her. "It is not that he does not love you."

"But he is so stern to me." And then Mrs. Orme had kissed her, and promised that none should be stern to her, there, in that house. On the morning after this Sir Peregrine had made his offer, and then she felt that the division between her and her boy would be wider than ever. And all this had come of that inheritance which she had demanded so eagerly for her child.

And now Lucius was sitting alone in his room at Orley Farm, having for the present given up all idea of attempting anything himself by means of the law. He had made his way into Mr. Dockwrath's office, and had there insulted the attorney in the presence of witnesses. His hope now was that the attorney might bring an action against him. If that were done he would thus have the means of bringing out all the facts of the case before a jury and a judge. It was fixed in his mind that if he could once drag that reptile before a public tribunal, and with loud voice declare the wrong that was being done, all might be well. The public would understand and would speak out, and the reptile would be scorned and trodden under foot. Poor Lucius! It is not always so easy to catch public sympathy, and it will occur sometimes that the wrong reptile is crushed by the great public heel.

He had his books before him as he sat there—his Latham and his Pritchard, and he had the jawbone of one savage and the skull of another. His Liverpool

bills for unadulterated guano were lying on the table, and a philosophical German treatise on agriculture which he had resolved to study. It became a man, he said to himself, to do a man's work in spite of any sorrow. But, nevertheless, as he sat there, his studies were but of little service to him. How many men have declared to themselves the same thing, but have failed when the trial came! Who can command the temper and the mind? At ten I will strike the lyre and begin my poem. But at ten the poetic spirit is under a dark cloud—because the water for the tea had not boiled when it was brought in at nine. And so the lyre remains unstricken.

And Lucius found that he could not strike his lyre. For days he had sat there and no good note had been produced. And then he had walked over his land, having a farming man at his heels, thinking that he could turn his mind to the actual and practical working of his land. But little good had come of that either. It was January, and the land was sloppy and half frozen. There was no useful work to be done on it. And then what farmer Greenwood had once said of him was true enough, "The young maister's spry and active surely; but he can't let unself down to stable doong and the loik o' that." He had some grand idea of farming—a conviction that the agricultural world in general was very backward and that he would set it right. Even now in his sorrow, as he walked through his splashy, frozen fields, he was tormented by a desire to do something, he knew not what, that might be great.

He had no such success on the present occasion and returned disconsolate to the house. This happened about noon on the day after that on which Sir Peregrine had declared himself. He returned as I have said

to the house and there at the kitchen door he met a little girl whom he knew well as belonging to The Cleeve. She was a favourite of Mrs. Orme's, was educated and clothed by her, and ran on her messages. Now she had brought a letter up to Lucius from his mother. Curtseying low she so told him, and he at once went into the sitting-room where he found it lying on his table. His hand was nervous as he opened it; but if he could have seen how tremulous had been the hand that wrote it! The letter was as follows:—

“DEAREST LUCIUS,

“I know you will be very much surprised at what I am going to tell you, but I hope you will not judge me harshly. If I know myself at all I would take no step of any kind for my own advantage which could possibly injure you. At the present moment we unfortunately do not agree about a subject which is troubling us both, and I cannot therefore consult you as I should otherwise have done. I trust that by God's mercy these troubles may come to an end, and that there may be no further differences between you and me.

“Sir Peregrine Orme has made me an offer of marriage and I have accepted it——” Lucius Mason when he had read so far threw down the letter upon the table, and rising suddenly from his chair walked rapidly up and down the room. “Marry him!” he said out loud, “marry him!” The idea that their fathers and mothers should marry and enjoy themselves is always a thing horrible to be thought of in the minds of the rising generation. Lucius Mason now began to feel against his mother the same sort of anger which Joseph Mason had felt when his father had married

again. "Marry him?" And then he walked rapidly about the room, as though some great injury had been threatened to him.

And so it had, in his estimation. Was it not her position in life to be his mother? Had she not had her young days? But it did not occur to him to think what those young days had been. And this then was the meaning of her receding from his advice and from his roof! She had been preparing for herself in the world new hopes, a new home, and a new ambition. And she had so prevailed upon the old man that he was about to do this foolish thing! Then again he walked up and down the room, injuring his mother much in his thoughts. He gave her credit for none of those circumstances which had truly actuated her in accepting the hand which Sir Peregrine had offered her. In that matter touching the Orley Farm estate he could acquit his mother instantly,—with acclamation. But in this other matter he had pronounced her guilty before she had been allowed to plead. Then he took up the letter and finished it.

"Sir Peregrine Orme has made me an offer of marriage and I have accepted it. It is very difficult to explain in a letter all the causes that have induced me to do so. The first perhaps is this, that I feel myself so bound to him by love and gratitude, that I think it my duty to fall in with all his wishes. He has pointed out to me that as my husband he can do more for me than would be possible for him without that name. I have explained to him that I would rather perish than that he should sacrifice himself; but he is pleased to say that it is no sacrifice. At any rate he so wishes it, and as Mrs. Orme has cordially assented, I feel myself bound to fall in with his views. It was only yesterday

that Sir Peregrine made his offer. I mention this that you may know that I have lost no time in telling you.

“Dearest Lucius, believe that I shall be as ever

“Your most affectionate mother,

“MARY MASON.”

“The little girl will wait for an answer if she finds that you are at the farm.”

“No,” he said to himself, still walking about the room. “She can never be to me the same mother that she was. I would have sacrificed everything for her. She should have been the mistress of my house, at any rate till she herself should have wished it otherwise. But now——” And then his mind turned away suddenly to Sophia Furnival.

I cannot myself but think that had that affair of the trial been set at rest Lady Mason would have been prudent to look for another home. The fact that Orley Farm was his house and not hers occurred almost too frequently to Lucius Mason; and I am not certain that it would have been altogether comfortable as a permanent residence for his mother after he should have brought home to it some such bride as her he now proposed to himself.

It was necessary that he should write an answer to his mother, which he did at once.

“Orley Farm,—January.

“DEAR MOTHER,

“It is I fear too late for me to offer any counsel on the subject of your letter. I cannot say that I think you are right.

Your affectionate son,

“LUCIUS MASON.”

And then, having finished this, he again walked the room. "It is all up between me and her," he said, "as real friends in life and heart. She shall still have the respect of a son, and I shall have the regard of a mother. But how can I trim my course to suit the welfare of the wife of Sir Peregrine Orme?" And then he lashed himself into anger at the idea that his mother should have looked for other solace than that which he could have given.

Nothing more from The Cleeve reached him that day; but early on the following morning he had a visitor whom he certainly had not expected. Before he sat down to his breakfast he heard the sound of a horse's feet before the door, and immediately afterwards Peregrine Orme entered the sitting-room. He was duly shown in by the servant, and in his ordinary way came forward quickly and shook hands. Then he waited till the door was closed, and at once began upon the subject which had brought him there.

"Mason," he said, "you have heard of this that is being done at The Cleeve?"

Lucius immediately fell back a step or two, and considered for a moment how he should answer. He had pressed very heavily on his mother in his own thoughts, but he was not prepared to hear her harshly spoken of by another.

"Yes," said he, "I have heard."

"And I understand from your mother that you do not approve of it."

"Approve of it! No; I do not approve of it."

"Nor by Heavens do I!"

"I do not approve of it," said Mason, speaking with deliberation; "but I do not know that I can take any steps towards preventing it."

"Cannot you see her, and talk to her, and tell her how wrong it is?"

"Wrong! I do not know that she is wrong in that sense. I do not know that you have any right to blame her. Why do not you speak to your grandfather?"

"So I have—as far as it was possible for me. But you do not know Sir Peregrine. No one has any influence over him, but my mother;—and now also your mother."

"And what does Mrs. Orme say?"

"She will say nothing. I know well that she disapproves of it. She must disapprove of it, though she will not say so. She would rather burn off both her hands than displease my grandfather. She says that he asked her and that she consented."

"It seems to me that it is for her and you to prevent this."

"No; it is for your mother to prevent it. Only think of it, Mason. He is over seventy, and, as he says himself, he will not burden the estate with a new jointure. Why should she do it?"

"You are wronging her there. It is no affair of money. She is not going to marry him for what she can get."

"Then why should she do it?"

"Because he tells her. These troubles about the lawsuit have turned her head, and she has put herself entirely into his hands. I think she is wrong. I could have protected her from all this evil, and would have done so. I could have done more, I think, than Sir Peregrine can do. But she has thought otherwise, and I do not know that I can help it."

"But will you speak to her? Will you make her

perceive that she is injuring a family that is treating her with kindness?"

"If she will come here I will speak to her. I cannot do it there. I cannot go down to your grandfather's house with such an object as that."

"All the world will turn against her if she marries him," said Peregrine. And then there was silence between them for a moment or two.

"It seems to me," said Lucius at last, "that you wrong my mother very much in this matter, and lay all the blame where but the smallest part of the blame is deserved. She has no idea of money in her mind, or any thought of pecuniary advantage. She is moved solely by what your grandfather has said to her,—and by an insane dread of some coming evil which she thinks may be lessened by his assistance. You are in the house with them, and can speak to him;—and if you please to her also. I do not see that I can do either."

"And you will not help me to break it off?"

"Certainly,—if I can see my way."

"Will you write to her?"

"Well; I will think about it."

"Whether she be to blame or not it must be your duty as well as mine to prevent such a marriage if it be possible. Think what people will say of it!"

After some further discussion Peregrine remounted his horse, and rode back to The Cleeve, not quite satisfied with young Mason.

"If you do speak to her,—to my mother, do it gently." Those were the last words whispered by Lucius as Peregrine Orme had his foot in the stirrup.

Young Peregrine Orme, as he rode home, felt that the world was using him very unkindly. Everything was going wrong with him, and an idea entered his

head that he might as well go and look for Sir John Franklin at the North Pole, or join some energetic traveller in the middle of Central Africa. He had proposed to Madeline Staveley and had been refused. That in itself caused a load to lie on his heart which was almost unendurable;—and now his grandfather was going to disgrace himself. He had made his little effort to be respectable and discreet, devoting himself to the county hunt and county drawing-rooms, giving up the pleasures of London and the glories of dissipation. And for what?

Then Peregrine began to argue within himself as some others have done before him—

“Were it not better done as others use——” he said to himself, in that or other language; and as he rode slowly into the courtyard of The Cleeve, he thought almost with regret of his old friend Carrotty Bob.

CHAPTER X

PEREGRINE'S ELOQUENCE

IN the last chapter Peregrine Orme called at Orley Farm with the view of discussing with Lucius Mason the conduct of their respective progenitors; and, as will be remembered, the young men agreed in a general way that their progenitors were about to make fools of themselves. Poor Peregrine, however, had other troubles on his mind. Not only had his grandfather been successful in love, but he had been unsuccessful. As he had journeyed home from Noningsby to The Cleeve in a high-wheeled vehicle which he called his trap, he had determined, being then in a frame of mind somewhat softer than was usual with him, to tell all his troubles to his mother. It sounds as though it were lackadaisical—such a resolve as this on the part of a dashing young man, who had been given to the pursuit of rats, and was now a leader among the sons of Nimrod in the pursuit of foxes. Young men of the present day, when got up for the eyes of the world, look and talk as though they never could tell their mothers anything,—as though they were harder than flint, and as little in want of a woman's counsel and a woman's help as a colonel of horse on the morning of a battle. But the rigid virility of his outward accoutrements does in no way alter the man of flesh and blood who wears them; the young hero, so stern to the eye, is, I believe, as often tempted by stress of sentiment to lay bare the sorrow of his heart as is his sister.

On this occasion Peregrine said to himself that he would lay bare the sorrow of his heart. He would find out what others thought of that marriage which he had proposed to himself; and then, if his mother encouraged him, and his grandfather approved, he would make another attack, beginning on the side of the judge, or perhaps on that of Lady Staveley.

But he found that others, as well as he, were labouring under a stress of sentiment; and when about to tell his own tale, he had learned that a tale was to be told to him. He had dined with Lady Mason, his mother, and his grandfather, and the dinner had been very silent. Three of the party were in love, and the fourth was burdened with the telling of the tale. The baronet himself said nothing on the subject as he and his grandson sat over their wine; but later in the evening Peregrine was summoned to his mother's room, and she, with considerable hesitation and much diffidence, informed him of the coming nuptials.

"Marry Lady Mason!" he had said.

"Yes, Peregrine. Why should he not do so if they both wish it?"

Peregrine thought that there were many causes and impediments sufficiently just why no such marriage should take place, but he had not his arguments ready at his fingers' ends. He was so stunned by the intelligence that he could say but little about it on that occasion. By the few words that he did say, and by the darkness of his countenance, he showed plainly enough that he disapproved. And then his mother said all that she could in the baronet's favour, pointing out that in a pecuniary way Peregrine would receive benefit rather than injury.

"I'm not thinking of the money, mother."

"No, my dear; but it is right that I should tell you how considerate your grandfather is."

"All the same I wish he would not marry this woman."

"Woman, Peregrine! You should not speak in that way of a friend whom I dearly love."

"She is a woman all the same." And then he sat sulkily looking at the fire. His own stress of sentiment did not admit of free discussion at the present moment and was necessarily postponed. On that other affair he was told that his grandfather would be glad to see him on the following morning; and then he left his mother.

"Your grandfather, Peregrine, asked for my assent," said Mrs. Orme; "and I thought it right to give it." This she said to make him understand that it was no longer in her power to oppose the match. And she was thoroughly glad that this was so, for she would have lacked the courage to oppose Sir Peregrine in anything.

On the next morning Peregrine saw his grandfather before breakfast. His mother came to his room door while he was dressing to whisper a word of caution to him. "Pray, be courteous to him," she said. "Remember how good he is to you—to us both. Say that you congratulate him."

"But I don't," said Peregrine.

"Ah, but, Peregrine——"

"I'll tell you what I'll do, mother. I'll leave the house altogether and go away, if you wish it."

"Oh, Peregrine! How can you speak in that way? But he's waiting now. Pray, pray, be kind in your manner to him."

He descended with the same sort of feeling which

had oppressed him on his return home after his encounter with Carroty Bob in Smithfield. Since then he had been on enduring good terms with his grandfather, but now again all the discomforts of war were imminent.

"Good-morning, Sir," he said, on going into his grandfather's dressing-room.

"Good-morning, Peregrine." And then there was silence for a moment or two.

"Did you see your mother last night?"

"Yes; I did see her."

"And she told you what it is that I propose to do?"

"Yes, Sir; she told me."

"I hope you understand, my boy, that it will not in any way affect your own interests injuriously."

"I don't care about that, Sir—one way or the other."

"But I do, Peregrine. Having seen to that I think that I have a right to please myself in this matter."

"Oh, yes, Sir; I know you have the right."

"Especially as I can benefit others. Are you aware that your mother has cordially given her consent to the marriage?"

"She told me that you had asked her, and that she had agreed to it. She would agree to anything."

"Peregrine, that is not the way in which you should speak of your mother."

And then the young man stood silent, as though there was nothing more to be said. Indeed, he had nothing more to say. He did not dare to bring forward in words all the arguments against the marriage which were now crowding themselves into his memory, but he could not induce himself to wish the old man joy, or to say any of those civil things which are customary on such occasions. The baronet sat for a while, silent

also, and a cloud of anger was coming across his brow; but he checked that before he spoke. "Well, my boy," he said, and his voice was almost more than usually kind, "I can understand your thoughts, and we will say nothing of them at present. All I will ask of you is to treat Lady Mason in a manner befitting the position in which I intend to place her."

"If you think it will be more comfortable, Sir, I will leave The Cleeve for a time."

"I hope that may not be necessary.—Why should it? Or at any rate, not as yet," he added, as a thought as to his wedding day occurred to him. And then the interview was over, and in another half-hour they met again at breakfast.

In the breakfast-room Lady Mason was also present. Peregrine was the last to enter, and as he did so his grandfather was already standing in his usual place, with the Book of Prayers in his hand, waiting that the servants should arrange themselves at their chairs before he knelt down. There was no time then for much greeting, but Peregrine did shake hands with her as he stepped across to his accustomed corner. He shook hands with her, and felt that her hand was very cold; but he did not look at her, nor did he hear any answer given to his few muttered words. When they all got up she remained close to Mrs. Orme, as though she might thus be protected from the anger which she feared from Sir Peregrine's other friends. And at breakfast also she sat close to her, far away from the baronet, and almost hidden by the urn from his grandson. Sitting there she said nothing; neither in truth did she eat anything. It was a time of great suffering to her, for she knew that her coming would not be welcomed by the young heir. "It must not be," she said

to herself over and over again. "Though he turn me out of the house, I must tell him that it cannot be so."

After breakfast Peregrine had ridden over to Orley Farm, and there held his consultation with the other heir. On his returning to The Cleeve, he did not go into the house, but having given up his horse to a groom, wandered away among the woods. Lucius Mason had suggested that he, Peregrine Orme, should himself speak to Lady Mason on this matter. He felt that his grandfather would be very angry, should he do so. But he did not regard that much. He had filled himself full with the theory of his duties, and he would act up to it. He would see her, without telling any one what was his purpose, and put it to her whether she would bring down this destruction on so noble a gentleman. Having thus resolved, he returned to the house, when it was already dark, and making his way into the drawing-room, sat himself down before the fire, still thinking of his plan. The room was dark, as such rooms are dark for the last hour or two before dinner in January, and he sat himself in an arm-chair before the fire, intending to sit there till it would be necessary that he should go to dress. It was an unaccustomed thing with him so to place himself at such a time, or to remain in the drawing-room at all till he came down for a few minutes before dinner; but he did so now, having been thrown out of his usual habits by the cares upon his mind. He had been so seated about a quarter of an hour, and was already nearly asleep, when he heard the rustle of a woman's garment, and looking round, with such light as the fire gave him, perceived that Lady Mason was in the room. She had entered very quietly, and was making her way in the dark to a chair which she fre-

quently occupied, between the fire and one of the windows, and in doing so she passed so near Peregrine as to touch him with her dress.

"Lady Mason," he said, speaking, in the first place, in order that she might know that she was not alone, "it is almost dark; shall I ring for candles for you?"

She started at hearing his voice, begged his pardon for disturbing him, declined his offer of light, and declared she was going up again to her own room immediately. But it occurred to him that if it would be well that he should speak to her, it would be well that he should do so at once; and what opportunity could be more fitting than the present? "If you are not in a hurry about anything," he said, "would you mind staying here for a few minutes?"

"Oh no, certainly not." But he could perceive that her voice trembled in uttering even these few words.

"I think I'd better light a candle," he said; and then he did light one of those which stood on the corner of the mantelpiece,—a solitary candle, which only seemed to make the gloom of the large room visible. She, however, was standing close to it, and would have much preferred that the room should have been left to its darkness.

"Won't you sit down for a few minutes?" and then she sat down. "I'll just shut the door, if you don't mind." And then, having done so, he returned to his own chair and again faced the fire. He saw that she was pale and nervous, and he did not like to look at her as he spoke. He began to reflect also that they might probably be interrupted by his mother, and he wished that they could adjourn to some other room. That, however, seemed to be impossible; so he summoned up all his courage, and began his task.

"I hope you won't think me uncivil, Lady Mason, for speaking to you about this affair."

"Oh no, Mr. Orme; I am sure that you will not be uncivil to me."

"Of course I cannot help feeling a great concern in it, for it's very nearly the same, you know, as if he were my father. Indeed, if you come to that, it's almost worse; and I can assure you it is nothing about money that I mind. Many fellows in my place would be afraid about that, but I don't care twopence what he does in that respect. He is so honest and so noble-hearted, that I am sure he won't do me a wrong."

"I hope not, Mr. Orme; and certainly not in respect to me."

"I only mention it for fear you should misunderstand me. But there are other reasons, Lady Mason, why this marriage will make me—make me very unhappy."

"Are there? I shall be so unhappy if I make others unhappy."

"You will then,—I can assure you of that. It is not only me, but your own son. I was up with him to-day, and he thinks of it the same as I do."

"What did he say, Mr. Orme?"

"What did he say? Well, I don't exactly remember his words; but he made me understand that your marriage with Sir Peregrine would make him very unhappy. He did indeed. Why do you not see him yourself, and talk to him?"

"I thought it best to write to him in the first place."

"Well, now you have written; and don't you think it would be well that you should go up and see him? You will find that he is quite as strong against it as I am,—quite."

Peregrine, had he known it, was using the arguments which were of all the least likely to induce Lady Mason to pay a visit to Orley Farm. She dreaded the idea of a quarrel with her son, and would have made almost any sacrifice to prevent such a misfortune; but at the present moment she feared the anger of his words almost more than the anger implied by his absence. If this trial could be got over, she would return to him and almost throw herself at his feet; but till that time, might it not be well that they should be apart? At any rate, these tidings of his discontent could not be efficacious in inducing her to seek him.

"Dear Lucius!" she said, not addressing herself to her companion, but speaking her thoughts. "I would not willingly give him cause to be discontented with me."

"He is, then, very discontented. I can assure you of that."

"Yes; he and I think differently about all this."

"Ah, but don't you think you had better speak to him before you make up your mind? He is your son, you know; and an uncommon clever fellow too. He'll know how to say all this much better than I do."

"Say what, Mr. Orme?"

"Why, of course you can't expect that anybody will like such a marriage as this;—that is, anybody except you and Sir Peregrine."

"Your mother does not object to it."

"My mother! But you don't know my mother yet. She would not object to have her head cut off if anybody wanted it that she cared about. I do not know how it has all been managed, but I suppose Sir Peregrine asked her. Then of course she would not object.

But look at the common sense of it, Lady Mason. What does the world always say when an old man like my grandfather marries a young woman?"

"But I am not——" So far she got, and then she stopped herself.

"We have all liked you very much. I'm sure I have for one; and I'll go in for you, heart and soul, in this shameful law business. When Lucius asked me, I didn't think anything of going to that scoundrel in Hamworth; and all along I've been delighted that Sir Peregrine took it up. By Heavens! I'd be glad to go down to Yorkshire myself, and walk into that fellow that wants to do you this injury. I would indeed; and I'll stand by you as strong as anybody. But, Lady Mason, when it comes to one's grandfather marrying, it——it——it——. Think what people in the county will say of him. If it was your father, and if he had been at the top of the tree all his life, how would you like to see him get a fall, and be laughed at as though he were in the mud just when he was too old ever to get up again?"

I am not sure whether Lucius Mason, with all his cleverness, could have put the matter much better, or have used a style of oratory more efficacious to the end in view. Peregrine had drawn his picture with a coarse pencil, but he had drawn it strongly, and with graphic effect. And then he paused; not with self-confidence, or as giving his companion time to see how great had been his art, but in want of words, and somewhat confused by the strength of his own thoughts. So he got up and poked the fire, turned his back to it, and then sat down again. "It is such a deuce of a thing, Lady Mason," he said, "that you must not be angry with me for speaking out."

"Oh, Mr. Orme, I am not angry, and I do not know what to say to you."

"Why don't you speak to Lucius?"

"What could he say more than you have said? Dear Mr. Orme, I would not injure him,—your grandfather, I mean,—for all that the world holds."

"You will injure him;—in the eyes of all his friends."

"Then I will not do it. I will go to him, and beg him that it may not be so. I will tell him that I cannot. Anything will be better than bringing him to sorrow or disgrace."

"By Jove! but will you really?" Peregrine was startled and almost frightened at the effect of his own eloquence. What would the baronet say when he learned that he had been talked out of his wife by his grandson?

"Mr. Orme," continued Lady Mason, "I am sure you do not understand how this matter has been brought about. If you did, however much it might grieve you, you would not blame me, even in your thoughts. From the first to the last my only desire has been to obey your grandfather in everything."

"But you would not marry him out of obedience?"

"I would—and did so intend. I would, certainly; if in doing so I did him no injury. You say that your mother would give her life for him. So would I;—that or anything else that I could give, without hurting him or others. It was not I that sought for this marriage; nor did I think of it. If you were in my place, Mr. Orme, you would know how difficult it is to refuse."

Peregrine again got up, and standing with his back to the fire, thought over it all again. His soft heart

almost relented towards the woman who had borne his rough words with so much patient kindness. Had Sir Peregrine been there then, and could he have condescended so far, he might have won his grandson's consent without much trouble. Peregrine, like some other generals, had expended his energy in gaining his victory, and was more ready now to come to easy terms than he would have been had he suffered in the combat.

"Well," he said after a while, "I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you for the manner in which you have taken what I said to you. Nobody knows about it yet, I suppose; and perhaps, if you will talk to the governor——"

"I will talk to him, Mr. Orme."

"Thank you; and then perhaps all things may turn out right. I'll go and dress now." And so saying he took his departure, leaving her to consider how best she might act at this crisis of her life, so that things might go right, if such were possible. The more she thought of it, the less possible it seemed that her affairs should be made to go right.

CHAPTER XI

OH, INDEED!

THE dinner on that day at The Cleeve was not very dull. Peregrine had some hopes that the idea of the marriage might be abandoned, and was at any rate much better disposed towards Lady Mason than he had been. He spoke to her, asking her whether she had been out, and suggesting roast mutton or some such creature comfort. This was lost neither on Sir Peregrine nor on Mrs. Orme, and they both exerted themselves to say a few words in a more cheery tone than had been customary in the house for the last day or two. Lady Mason herself did not say much; but she had sufficient tact to see the effort which was being made; and though she spoke but little she smiled and accepted graciously the courtesies that were tendered to her.

Then the two ladies went away, and Peregrine was again left with his grandfather. "That was a nasty accident that Graham had going out of Monkton Grange," said he, speaking on the moment of his closing the dining-room door after his mother. "I suppose you heard all about it, Sir?" Having fought his battle so well before dinner, he was determined to give some little rest to his half-vanquished enemy.

"The first tidings we heard were that he was dead," said Sir Peregrine, filling his glass.

"No; he wasn't dead. But of course you know that now. He broke an arm and two ribs, and got rather

a bad squeeze. He was just behind me, you know, and I had to wait for him. I lost the run, and had to see Harriet Tristram go away with the best lead any one has had to a fast thing this year. That's an uncommon nasty place at the back of Monkton Grange."

"I hope, Peregrine, you don't think too much about Harriet Tristram."

"Think of her! who? Think of her in what sort of a way? I think she goes uncommonly well to hounds."

"That may be, but I should not wish to see you pin your happiness on any lady that was celebrated chiefly for going well to hounds."

"Do you mean marry her?" and Peregrine immediately made a strong comparison in his mind between Miss Tristram and Madeline Staveley.

"Yes; that's what I did mean."

"I wouldn't have her if she owned every fox-cover in the county. No, by Jove! I know a trick worth two of that. It's jolly enough to see them going, but as to being in love with them—in that sort of way——"

"You are quite right, my boy; quite right. It is not that that a man wants in a wife."

"No," said Peregrine, with a melancholy cadence in his voice, thinking of what it was that he did want. And so they sat sipping their wine. The turn which the conversation had taken had for the moment nearly put Lady Mason out of the young man's head.

"You would be very young to marry yet," said the baronet.

"Yes, I should be young; but I don't know that there is any harm in that."

"Quite the contrary, if a young man feels himself to be sufficiently settled. Your mother I know would

be very glad that you should marry early;—and so should I, if you married well.”

What on earth could all this mean? It could not be that his grandfather knew that he was in love with Miss Staveley; and had this been known his grandfather would not have talked of Harriet Tristram. “Oh yes; of course a fellow should marry well. I don’t think much of marrying for money.”

“Nor do I, Peregrine;—I think very little of it.”

“Nor about being of very high birth.”

“Well, it would make me unhappy—very unhappy, if you were to marry below your own rank.”

“What do you call my own rank?”

“I mean any girl whose father is not a gentleman, and whose mother is not a lady; and of whose education among ladies you could not feel certain.”

“I could be quite certain about her,” said Peregrine, very innocently.

“Her! what her?”

“Oh, I forgot that we were talking about nobody.”

“You don’t mean Harriet Tristram?”

“No, certainly not.”

“Of whom were you thinking, Peregrine? May I ask—if it be not too close a secret?” And then again there was a pause, during which Peregrine emptied his glass and filled it again. He had no objection to talk to his grandfather about Miss Staveley, but he felt ashamed of having allowed the matter to escape him in this sort of way. “I will tell you why I ask, my boy,” continued the baronet. “I am going to do that which many people will call a very foolish thing.”

“You mean about Lady Mason.”

“Yes; I mean my own marriage with Lady Mason. We will not talk about that just at present, and I only

mention it to explain that before I do so, I shall settle the property permanently. If you were married I should at once divide it with you. I should like to keep the old house myself, till I die——”

“Oh, Sir!”

“But sooner than give you cause of offence, I would give that up.”

“I would not consent to live in it unless I did so as your guest.”

“Until your marriage I think of settling on you a thousand a year;—but it would add to my happiness if I thought it likely that you would marry soon. Now may I ask of whom were you thinking?”

Peregrine paused for a second or two before he made any reply, and then he brought it out boldly. “I was thinking of Madeline Staveley.”

“Then, my boy, you were thinking of the prettiest girl and the best-bred lady in the county. Here’s her health!” and he filled for himself a bumper of claret. “You couldn’t have named a woman whom I should be more proud to see you bring home. And your mother’s opinion of her is the same as mine. I happen to know that;” and with a look of triumph he drank his glass of wine, as though much that was very joyful to him had been already settled.

“Yes,” said Peregrine mournfully, “she is a very nice girl; at least I think so.”

“The man who can win her, Peregrine, may consider himself to be a lucky fellow. You were quite right in what you were saying about money. No man feels more sure of that than I do. But if I am not mistaken Miss Staveley will have something of her own. I rather think that Arbuthnot got ten thousand pounds.”

"I'm sure I don't know, Sir," said Peregrine; and his voice was by no means as much elated as that of his grandfather.

"I think he did; or if he didn't get it all, the remainder is settled on him. And the judge is not a man to behave better to one child than to another."

"I suppose not."

And then the conversation flagged a little, for the enthusiasm was all one side. It was moreover on that side which naturally would have been the least enthusiastic. Poor Peregrine had only told half his secret as yet, and that not the most important half. To Sir Peregrine the tidings, as far as he had heard them, were very pleasant. He did not say to himself that he would purchase his grandson's assent to his own marriage by giving his consent to his grandson's marriage. But it did seem to him that the two affairs, acting upon each other, might both be made to run smooth.

His heir could have made no better choice in selecting the lady of his love. Sir Peregrine had feared much that some Miss Tristram or the like might have been tendered to him as the future Lady Orme, and he was agreeably surprised to find that a new mistress for The Cleeve had been so well chosen. He would be all kindness to his grandson and win from him, if it might be possible, reciprocal courtesy and complaisance. "Your mother will be very pleased when she hears this," he said.

"I meant to tell my mother," said Peregrine, still very dolefully, "but I do not know that there is anything in it to please her. I only said that I—I admired Miss Staveley."

"My dear boy, if you'll take my advice you'll pro-

pose to her at once. You have been staying in the same house with her, and——.”

“But I have.”

“Have what?”

“I have proposed to her.”

“Well?”

“And she has refused me. You know all about it now, and there’s no such great cause for joy.”

“Oh, you have proposed to her. Have you spoken to her father or mother?”

“What was the use when she told me plainly that she did not care for me? Of course I should have asked her father. As to Lady Staveley, she and I got on uncommonly well. I’m almost inclined to think that she would not have objected.”

“It would be a very nice match for them, and I dare say she would not have objected.” And then for some ten minutes they sat looking at the fire. Peregrine had nothing more to say about it, and the baronet was thinking how best he might encourage his grandson.

“You must try again, you know,” at last he said.

“Well; I fear not. I do not think it would be any good. I’m not quite sure she does not care for some one else.”

“Who is he?”

“Oh, a fellow that’s there. The man who broke his arm. I don’t say she does, you know, and of course you won’t mention it.”

Sir Peregrine gave the necessary promise, and then endeavoured to give encouragement to the lover. He would himself see the judge, if it were thought expedient, and explain what liberal settlement would be made on the lady in the event of her altering her mind.

“Young ladies, you know, are very prone to alter their

minds on such matters," said the old man. In answer to which Peregrine declared his conviction that Madeline Staveley would not alter her mind. But then do not all despondent lovers hold that opinion of their own mistresses?

Sir Peregrine had been a great gainer by what had occurred, and so he felt it. At any rate all the novelty of the question of his own marriage was over, as between him and Peregrine; and then he had acquired a means of being gracious which must almost disarm his grandson of all power of criticism. When he, an old man, was ready to do so much to forward the views of a young man, could it be possible that the young man should oppose his wishes? And Peregrine was aware that his power of opposition was thus lessened.

In the evening nothing remarkable occurred between them. Each had his or her own plans; but these plans could not be furthered by anything to be said in a general assembly. Lady Mason had already told to Mrs. Orme all that had passed in the drawing-room before dinner, and Sir Peregrine had determined that he would consult Mrs. Orme as to that matter regarding Miss Staveley. He did not think much of her refusal. Young ladies always do refuse—at first.

On the day but one following this there came another visit from Mr. Furnival, and he was for a long time closeted with Sir Peregrine. Matthew Round had, he said, been with him, and he felt himself obliged in the performance of his duty to submit a case to counsel on behalf of his client Joseph Mason. He had not as yet received the written opinion of Sir Richard Leatheram, to whom he had applied; but nevertheless, as he wished to give every possible notice, he had

called to say that his firm were of opinion that an action must be brought either for forgery or for perjury.

"For perjury!" Mr. Furnival had said.

"Well; yes. We would wish to be as little harsh as possible. But if we convict her of having sworn falsely when she gave evidence as to having copied the codicil herself, and having seen it witnessed by the pretended witnesses;—why in that case of course the property would go back."

"I can't give any opinion as to what might be the result in such a case," said Mr. Furnival.

Mr. Round had gone on to say that he thought it improbable that the action could be tried before the summer assizes.

"The sooner the better as far as we are concerned," said Mr. Furnival.

"If you really mean that, I will see that there shall be no unnecessary delay." Mr. Furnival had declared that he did really mean it, and so the interview had ended.

Mr. Furnival had really meant it, fully concurring in the opinion which Mr. Chaffanbrass had expressed on this matter; but nevertheless the increasing urgency of the case had almost made him tremble. He still carried himself with a brave outside before Mat. Round, protesting as to the utter absurdity as well as cruelty of the whole proceeding; but his conscience told him that it was not absurd. "Perjury!" he said to himself, and then he rang the bell for Crabwitz. The upshot of that interview was that Mr. Crabwitz received a commission to arrange a meeting between that great barrister, the member for the Essex Marshes, and Mr. Solomon Aram.

"Won't it look rather, rather—rather—— you know what I mean, Sir?" Crabwitz had asked.

"We must fight these people with their own weapons," said Mr. Furnival;—not exactly with justice, seeing that Messrs. Round and Crook were not at all of the same calibre in the profession as Mr. Solomon Aram.

Mr. Furnival had already at this time seen Mr. Slow, of the firm of Slow and Bideawhile, who were Sir Peregrine's solicitors. This he had done chiefly that he might be able to tell Sir Peregrine that he had seen him. Mr. Slow had declared that the case was one which his firm would not be prepared to conduct, and he named a firm to which he should recommend his client to apply. But Mr. Furnival, carefully considering the whole matter, had resolved to take the advice and benefit by the experience of Mr. Chaffanbrass

And then he went down once more to The Cleeve. Poor Mr. Furnival! In these day he was dreadfully buffeted about both as regards his outer man and his inner conscience by this unfortunate case, giving up to it time that would otherwise have turned itself into heaps of gold; giving up domestic conscience—for Mrs. Furnival was still hot in her anger against poor Lady Mason; and giving up also much peace of mind, for he felt that he was soiling his hands by dirty work. But he thought of the lady's pale, sweet face, of her tear-laden eye, of her soft, beseeching tones, and gentle touch; he thought of these things—as he should not have thought of them;—and he persevered.

On this occasion he was closeted with Sir Peregrine for a couple of hours, and each heard much from the other that surprised him very much. Sir Peregrine,

when he was told that Mr. Solomon Aram from Bucklersbury, and Mr. Chaffanbrass from the Old Bailey, were to be retained for the defence of his future wife, drew himself up and said that he could hardly approve of it. The gentlemen named were no doubt very clever in criminal concerns; he could understand as much as that, though he had not had great opportunity of looking into affairs of that sort. But surely, in Lady Mason's case, assistance of such a description would hardly be needed. Would it not be better to consult Messrs. Slow and Bideawhile?

And then it turned out that Messrs. Slow and Bideawhile had been consulted; and Mr. Furnival, not altogether successfully, endeavoured to throw dust into the baronet's eyes, declaring that in a combat with the devil one must use the devil's weapons. He assured Sir Peregrine that he had given the matter his most matured and indeed most painful professional consideration; there were unfortunate circumstances which required peculiar care; it was a matter which would depend entirely on the evidence of one or two persons who might be suborned; and in such a case it would be well to trust to those who knew how to break down and crush a lying witness. In such work as that Slow and Bideawhile would be innocent and ignorant as babes. As to breaking down and crushing a witness anxious to speak the truth, Mr. Furnival at that time said nothing.

"I will not think that falsehood and fraud can prevail," said Sir Peregrine proudly.

"But they do prevail sometimes," said Mr. Furnival. And then with much outer dignity of demeanour, but with some shamefaced tremblings of the inner man hidden under the guise of that outer dignity,

Sir Peregrine informed the lawyer of his great purpose.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Furnival, throwing himself back into his chair with a start.

"Yes, Mr. Furnival. I should not have taken the liberty to trouble you with a matter so private in its nature, but for your close professional intimacy and great friendship with Lady Mason."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Furnival; and the baronet could understand from the lawyer's tone that even he did not approve.

CHAPTER XII

WHY SHOULD HE GO?

"I AM well aware, Mr. Staveley, that you are one of those gentlemen who amuse themselves by frequently saying such things to girls. I had learned your character in that respect before I had been in the house two days."

"Then, Miss Furnival, you learned what was very false. May I ask who has blackened me in this way in your estimation?" It will be easily seen from this that Mr. Augustus Staveley and Miss Furnival were at the present moment alone together in one of the rooms at Noningsby.

"My informant," she replied, "has been no one especial sinner whom you can take by the throat and punish. Indeed, if you must shoot anybody, it should be chiefly yourself, and after that your father, and mother, and sisters. But you need not talk of being black. Such sins are venial nowadays, and convey nothing deeper than a light shade of brown."

"I regard a man who can act in such a way as very base."

"Such a way as what, Mr. Staveley?"

"A man who can win a girl's heart for his own amusement."

"I said nothing about the winning of hearts. That is treachery of the worst dye; but I acquit you of any

such attempt. When there is a question of the winning of hearts men look so different."

"I don't know how they look," said Augustus, not altogether satisfied as to the manner in which he was being treated—"but such has been my audacity,—my too great audacity on the present occasion."

"You are the most audacious of men, for your audacity would carry you to the feet of another lady to-morrow without the slightest check."

"And that is the only answer I am to receive from you?"

"It is quite answer enough. What would you have me do? Get up and decline the honour of being Mrs. Augustus Staveley with a curtsey?"

"No—I would have you do nothing of the kind. I would have you get up and accept the honour,—with a kiss."

"So that you might have the kiss, and I might have the;—I was going to say disappointment, only that would be untrue. Let me assure you that I am not so demonstrative in my tokens of regard."

"I wonder whether you mean that you are not so honest?"

"No, Mr. Staveley; I mean nothing of the kind; and you are very impertinent to express such a supposition. What have I done or said to make you suppose that I have lost my heart to you?"

"As you have mine, it is at any rate human nature in me to hope that I might have yours."

"Psha! your heart! You have been making a shuttlecock of it till it is doubtful whether you have not banged it to pieces. I know two ladies who carry in their caps two feathers out of it. It is so easy to see when a man is in love. They all go cross-gartered

like Malvolio;—cross-gartered in their looks and words and doings.”

“And there is no touch of all this in me?”

“You cross-gartered! You have never got so far yet as a lackadaisical twist to the corner of your mouth. Did you watch Mr. Orme before he went away?”

“Why; was he cross-gartered?”

“But you men have no eyes; you never see anything. And your idea of love-making is to sit under a tree wishing, wondering whether the ripe fruit will fall down into your mouth. Ripe fruit does sometimes fall, and then it is all well with you. But if it won’t, you pass on and say that it is sour. As for climbing——”

“The fruit generally falls too fast to admit of such exercise,” said Staveley, who did not choose that all the sharp things should be said on the other side.

“And that is the result of your very extended experience? The orchards which have been opened to you have not, I fear, been of the first quality. Mr. Staveley, my hand will do very well by itself. Such is not the sort of climbing that is required. That is what I call stooping to pick up the fruit that has fallen.” And as she spoke, she moved a little way from him on the sofa.

“And how is a man to climb?”

“Do you really mean that you want a lesson? But if I were to tell you, my words would be thrown away. Men will not labour who have gotten all that they require without work. Why strive to deserve any woman, when women are plenty who do not care to be deserved? That plan of picking up the fallen apples is so much the easier.”

The lesson might perhaps have been given, and Miss Furnival might have imparted to Mr. Staveley her idea of "excelsior" in the matter of love-making, had not Mr. Staveley's mother come into the room at that moment. Mrs. Staveley was beginning to fear that the results of her Christmas hospitality would not be satisfactory. Peregrine Orme, whom she would have been so happy to welcome to the warmest corner of her household temple as a son, had been sent away in wretchedness and disappointment. Madeline was moping about the house, hardly making an effort to look like herself; attributing, in her mother's ears, all her complaint to that unexpected interview with Peregrine Orme, but not so attributing it—as her mother fancied—with correctness. And there was Felix Graham still in the room up stairs, the doctor having said that he might be moved in a day or two;—that is, such movement might possibly be effected without detriment;—but having said also that another ten days of uninterrupted rest would be very desirable. And now, in addition to this, her son Augustus was to be found on every wet morning closeted somewhere with Sophia Furnival;—on every wet morning, and sometimes on dry mornings also!

And then, on this very day, Lady Staveley had discovered that Felix Graham's door in the corridor was habitually left open. She knew her child too well, and was too clear and pure in her own mind, to suppose that there was anything wrong in this;—that clandestine talkings were arranged, or anything planned in secret. What she feared was that which really occurred. The door was left open, and as Madeline passed Felix would say a word, and then Madeline would pause and answer him. Such words as they

were might have been spoken before all the household, and if so spoken would have been free from danger. But they were not free from danger when spoken in that way, in the passage of a half-closed doorway;—all which Lady Staveley understood perfectly.

“Baker,” she had said, with more of anger in her voice than was usual with her, “why do you leave that door open?”

“I think it sweetens the room, my lady;” and, indeed, Felix Graham sometimes thought so too.

“Nonsense! every sound in the house must be heard. Keep it shut, if you please.”

“Yes, my lady,” said Mrs. Baker—who also understood perfectly.

“He is better, my darling,” said Mrs. Baker to Madeline, the same day; “and indeed, for that he is well enough as regards eating and drinking. But it would be cruelty to move him yet. I heard what the doctor said.”

“Who talks of moving him?”

“Well, he talks of it himself; and the doctor said it might be possible. But I know what that means.”

“What does it mean?”

“Why, just this: that if we want to get rid of him, it won’t quite be the death of him.”

“But who wants to get rid of him?”

“I’m sure I don’t. I don’t mind my trouble the least in life. He’s as nice a young gentleman as ever I sat beside the bed of; and he’s full of spirit—he is.”

And then Madeline appealed to her mother. Surely her mother would not let Mr. Graham be sent out of the house in his present state, merely because the doctor said it might be possible to move him without causing his instant death! And tears stood in poor

Madeline's eyes as she thus pleaded the cause of the sick and wounded. This again tormented Lady Staveley, who found it necessary to give further caution to Mrs. Baker. "Baker," she said, "how can you be so foolish as to be talking to Miss Madeline about Mr. Graham's arm?"

"Who, my lady? I, my lady?"

"Yes, you; when you know that the least thing frightens her. Don't you remember how ill it made her when Roger"—Roger was an old family groom—"when Roger had that accident?" Lady Staveley might have saved herself the trouble of the reminiscence as to Roger, for Baker knew more about it than that. When Roger's scalp had been laid bare by a fall, Miss Madeline had chanced to see it, and had fainted; but Miss Madeline was not fainting now. Baker knew all about it, almost better than Lady Staveley herself. It was of very little use talking to Baker about Roger the groom. Baker thought that Mr. Felix Graham was a very nice young man, in spite of his "not being exactly handsome like about the physiognomy," as she remarked to one of the younger maids, who much preferred Peregrine Orme.

Coming away from this last interview with Mrs. Baker, Lady Staveley interrupted her son and Sophia Furnival in the back drawing-room, and began to feel that her solicitude for her children would be almost too much for her. Why had she asked that nasty girl to her house, and why would not the nasty girl go away? As for her going away, there was no present hope, for it had been arranged that she should stay for another fortnight. Why could not the Fates have been kind, and have allowed Felix Graham and Miss

Furnival to fall in love with each other? "I can never make a daughter of her if he does marry her," Lady Staveley said to herself, as she looked at them.

Augustus looked as though he were detected, and stammered out some question about his mother and the carriage; but Miss Furnival did not for a moment lose her easy presence of mind. "Lady Staveley," said she, "why does not your son go and hunt, or shoot, or fish, instead of staying in the house all day? It seems to me that his time is so heavy on his hands that he will almost have to hang himself."

"I'm sure I can't tell," said Lady Staveley, who was not so perfect an actor as her guest.

"I do think gentlemen in the house in the morning always look so unfortunate. You have been endeavouring to make yourself agreeable, but you know you've been yawning."

"Do you suppose then that men never sit still in the morning?" said Augustus.

"Oh, in their chambers, yes; or on the bench, and perhaps also behind counters; but they very seldom do so in a drawing-room. You have been fidgeting about with the poker till you have destroyed the look of the fireplace."

"Well, I'll go and fidget up stairs with Graham," said he; and so he left the room.

"Nasty, sly girl," said Lady Staveley to herself as she took up her work and sat herself down in her own chair.

Augustus did go up to his friend and found him reading letters. There was no one else in the room, and the door when Augustus reached it was properly closed. "I think I shall be off to-morrow, old boy," said Felix.

"Then I think you'll do no such thing," said Augustus. "What's in the wind now?"

"The doctor said this morning that I could be moved without danger."

"He said that it might possibly be done in two or three days—that was all. What on earth makes you so impatient? You've nothing to do. Nobody else wants to see you; and nobody here wants to get rid of you."

"You're wrong in all your three statements."

"The deuce I am! Who wants to get rid of you?"

"That shall come last. I have something to do, and somebody else does want to see me. I've got a letter from Mary here, and another from Mrs. Thomas;" and he held up to view two letters which he had received, and which had, in truth, startled him.

"Mary's duenna;—the artist who is supposed to be moulding the wife?"

"Yes; Mary's duenna, or Mary's artist, whichever you please."

"And which of them wants to see you? It's just like a woman, to require a man's attendance exactly when he's unable to move."

Then Felix, though he did not give up the letters to be read, described to a certain extent their contents. "I don't know what on earth has happened," he said. "Mary is praying to be forgiven, and saying that it is not her fault; and Mrs Thomas is full of apologies, declaring that her conscience forces her to tell everything; and yet, between them both, I do not know what has happened."

"Miss Snow has probably lost the key of the work-box you gave her."

"I have not given her a workbox."

"Then the writing-desk. That's what a man has to endure when he will make himself head school-master to a young lady. And so you're going to look after your charge with your limbs still in bandages?"

"Just so;" and then he took up the two letters and read them again, while Staveley still sat on the foot of the bed. "I wish I knew what to think about it," said Felix.

"About what?" said the other. And then there was another pause, and another reading of a portion of the letters.

"There seems something—something almost frightful to me," said Felix gravely, "in the idea of marrying a girl in a few months' time, who now, at so late a period of our engagement, writes to me in that sort of cold, formal way."

"It's the proper moulded-wife style, you may depend," said Augustus.

"I'll tell you what, Staveley, if you can talk to me seriously for five minutes, I shall be obliged to you. If that is impossible to you, say so, and I will drop the matter."

"Well, go on; I am serious enough in what I intend to express, even though I may not be so in my words."

"I'm beginning to have my doubts about this dear girl."

"I've had my doubts for some time."

"Not, mark you, with regard to myself. The question is not now whether I can love her sufficiently for my own happiness. On that side I have no longer the right to a doubt."

"But you wouldn't marry her if you did not love her."

"We need not discuss that. But what if she does

not love me? What, if she would think it a release to be free from this engagement? How am I to find that out?"

Augustus sat for a while silent, for he did feel that the matter was serious. The case as he looked at it stood thus:—His friend Graham had made a very foolish bargain, from which he would probably be glad to escape, though he could not now bring himself to say as much. But this bargain, bad for him, would probably be very good for the young lady. The young lady, having no shilling of her own, and no merits of birth or early breeding to assist her outlook in the world, might probably regard her ready-made engagement to a clever, kind-hearted, high-spirited man, as an advantage not readily to be abandoned. Staveley, as a sincere friend, was very anxious that the match should be broken off; but he could not bring himself to tell Graham that he thought that the young lady would so wish. According to his idea the young lady must undergo a certain amount of disappointment, and receive a certain amount of compensation. Graham had been very foolish, and must pay for his folly. But in preparing to do so, it would be better that he should see and acknowledge the whole truth of the matter.

"Are you sure that you have found out your own feelings?" Staveley said at last; and his tone was then serious enough even for his friend.

"It hardly matters whether I have or have not," said Felix.

"It matters above all things;—above all things, because as to them you may come to something like certainty. Of the inside of her heart you cannot know so much. The fact I take it is this—that you would wish to escape from this bondage."

"No; not unless I thought she regarded it as bondage also. It may be that she does. As for myself, I believe that at the present moment such a marriage would be for me the safest step that I could take."

"Safe as against what danger?"

"All dangers. How, if I should learn to love another woman,—some one utterly out of my reach,—while I am still betrothed to her?"

"I rarely flatter you, Graham, and don't mean to do it now; but no girl ought to be out of your reach. You have talent, position, birth, and gifts of nature, which should make you equal to any lady. As for money, the less you have the more you should look to get. But if you would cease to be mad, two years would give you command of an income."

"But I shall never cease to be mad."

"Who is it that cannot be serious, now?"

"Well, I will be serious—serious enough. I can afford to be so, as I have received my medical passport for to-morrow. No girl, you say, ought to be out of my reach. If the girl were one Miss Staveley, should she be regarded as out of my reach?"

"A man doesn't talk about his own sister," said Staveley, having got up from the bed and walked to the window, "and I know you don't mean anything."

"But, by Heavens! I do mean a great deal."

"What is it you mean, then?"

"I mean this—What would you say if you learned that I was a suitor for her hand?"

Staveley had been right in saying that a man does not talk about his own sister. When he had declared, with so much affectionate admiration for his friend's prowess, that he might aspire to the hand of any lady, that one retiring, modest-browed girl had not been

thought of by him. A man in talking to another man about women is always supposed to consider those belonging to himself as exempt from the incidents of the conversation. The dearest friends do not talk to each other about their sisters when they have once left school; and a man in such a position as that now taken by Graham has to make fight for his ground as closely as though there had been no former intimacies. My friend Smith in such a matter as that, though I have been hail fellow with him for the last ten years, has very little advantage over Jones, who was introduced to the house for the first time last week. And therefore Staveley felt himself almost injured when Felix Graham spoke to him about Madeline.

"What would I say? Well—that is a question one does not understand, unless—unless you really meant to state it as a fact that it was your intention to propose to her."

"But I mean rather to state it as a fact that it is not my intention to propose to her."

"Then we had better not speak of her."

"Listen to me a moment. In order that I may not do so, it will be better for me—better for us all, that I should leave the house."

"Do you mean to say——?"

"Yes, I do mean to say! I mean to say all that your mind is now suggesting to you. I quite understand your feelings when you declare that a man does not like to talk of his own sister, and therefore we will talk of your sister no more. Old fellow, don't look at me as though you meant to drop me."

Augustus came back to the bedside, and again seating himself, put his hand almost caressingly over his friend's shoulder. "I did not think of this," he said.

"No; one never does think of it," Graham replied.

"And she?"

"She knows no more of it than that bed-post," said Graham. "The injury, such as there is, is all on one side. But I'll tell you who suspects it."

"Baker?"

"Your mother. I am much mistaken if you will not find that she, with all her hospitality, would prefer that I should recover my strength elsewhere."

"But you have done nothing to betray yourself."

"A mother's ears are very sharp. I know that it is so. I cannot explain to you how. Do you tell her that I think of getting up to London to-morrow, and see how she will take it. And, Staveley, do not for a moment suppose that I am reproaching her. She is quite right. I believe that I have in no way committed myself—that I have said no word to your sister with which Lady Staveley has a right to feel herself aggrieved; but if she has had the wit to read the thoughts of my bosom, she is quite right to wish that I were out of the house."

Poor Lady Staveley had been possessed of no such wit at all. The sphynx which she had read had been one much more in her own line. She had simply read the thoughts in her daughter's bosom—or rather, the feelings in her daughter's heart.

Augustus Staveley hardly knew what he ought to say. He was not prepared to tell his friend that he was the very brother-in-law for whose connection he would be desirous. Such a marriage for Madeline, even should Madeline desire it, would not be advantageous. When Augustus told Graham that he had gifts of nature which made him equal any lady, he did not include his own sister. And yet the idea of

acquiescing in his friend's sudden departure was very painful to him. "There can be no reason why you should not stay up here, you know," at last he said;—and in so saying he pronounced an absolute verdict against poor Felix.

On few matters of moment to a man's own heart can he speak out plainly the whole truth that is in him. Graham had intended so to do, but had deceived himself.

He had not absolutely hoped that his friend would say, "Come among us, and be one of us; take her, and be my brother." But yet there came upon his heart a black load of disappointment, in that the words which were said were the exact opposite of these. Graham had spoken of himself as unfit to match with Madeline Staveley, and Madeline Staveley's brother had taken him at his word. The question which Augustus asked himself was this—Was it, or was it not practicable that Graham should remain there without danger of intercourse with his sister? To Felix the question came in a very different shape. After having spoken as he had spoken—might he be allowed to remain there, enjoying such intercourse, or might he not? That was the question to which he had unconsciously demanded answer;—and unconsciously he had still hoped that the question might be answered in his favour. He had so hoped, although he was burdened with Mary Snow, and although he had spoken of his engagement with that lady in so rigid a spirit of self-martyrdom. But the question had been answered against him. The offer of a further asylum in the seclusion of that bed-room had been made to him by his friend with a sort of proviso that it would not be well that he should go further than the bed-room,

and his inner feelings at once grated against each other, making him wretched and almost angry.

"Thank you, no; I understand how kind you are, but I will not do that. I will write up to-night, and shall certainly start to-morrow."

"My dear fellow——"

"I should get into a fever, if I were to remain in this house after what I have told you. I could not endure to see you, or your mother, or Baker, or Marian, or any one else. Don't talk about it. Indeed, you ought to feel that it is not possible. I have made a confounded ass of myself, and the sooner I get away the better. I say—perhaps you would not be angry if I was to ask you to let me sleep for an hour or so now. After that I'll get up and write my letters."

He was very sore. He knew that he was sick at heart, and ill at ease, and cross with his friend; and knew also that he was unreasonable in being so. Staveley's words and manner had been full of kindness. Graham was aware of this, and was therefore the more irritated with himself. But this did not prevent his being angry and cross with his friend.

"Graham," said the other, "I see clearly enough that I have annoyed you."

"Not in the least. A man falls into the mud, and then calls to another man to come and see him. The man in the mud of course is not comfortable."

"But you have called to me, and I have not been able to help you."

"I did not suppose you would, so there has been no disappointment. Indeed, there was no possibility for help. I shall follow out the line of life which I have long since chalked out for myself, and I do not expect that I shall be more wretched than other poor devils

around me. As far as my idea goes, it all makes very little difference. Now leave me; there's a good fellow."

"Dear old fellow, I would give my right hand if it would make you happy!"

"But it won't. Your right hand will make somebody else happy, I hope."

"I'll come up to you again before dinner."

"Very well. And, Staveley, what we have now said cannot be forgotten between us; but when we next meet, and ever after, let it be as though it were forgotten." Then he settled himself down on the bed, and Augustus left the room.

It will not be supposed that Graham did go to sleep, or that he had any thought of doing so. When he was alone those words of his friend rang over and over again in his ears, "No girl ought to be out of your reach." Why should Madeline Staveley be out of his reach, simply because she was his friend's sister? He had been made welcome in that house, and therefore he was bound to do nothing unhandsome to the family. But then he was bound by other laws, equally to do nothing unhandsome by any other family,—or by any other lady. If there was anything in Staveley's words, they applied as strongly to Staveley's sister as to any other girl. And why should not he, a lawyer, marry a lawyer's daughter? Sophia Furnival, with her hatful of money, would not be considered too high for him; and in what respect was Madeline Staveley above Sophia Furnival? That the one was immeasurably above the other in all those respects which in his estimation tended towards female perfection, he knew to be true enough; but the fruit which he had been forbidden to gather hung no

higher on the social tree than that other fruit which he had been specially invited to pluck and garner.

And then Graham was not a man to think any fruit too high for him. He had no overweening idea of his own deserts, either socially or professionally, nor had he taught himself to expect great things from his own genius; but he had that audacity of spirit which bids a man hope to compass that which he wishes to compass,—that audacity which is both the father and mother of success,—that audacity which seldom exists without the inner capability on which it ought to rest.

But then there was Mary Snow! Augustus Staveley thought but little of Mary Snow. According to his theory of his friend's future life, Mary Snow might be laid aside without much difficulty. If this were so, why should not Madeline be within his reach? But then was it so? Had he not betrothed himself to Mary Snow in the presence of the girl's father, with every solemnity and assurance, in a manner fixed beyond that of all other betrothals? Alas, yes; and for this reason it was right that he should hurry away from Noningsby.

Then he thought of Mary's letter, and of Mrs. Thomas's letter. What was it that had been done? Mary had written as though she had been charged with some childish offence; but Mrs. Thomas talked solemnly of acquitting her own conscience. What could have happened that had touched Mrs. Thomas in the conscience?

But his thoughts soon ran away from the little house at Peckham, and settled themselves again at Noningsby. Should he hear more of Madeline's footsteps?—and if not, why should they have been banished from the corridor? Should he hear her voice

again at the door,—and if not, why should it have been hushed? There is a silence which may be more eloquent than the sounds which it follows. Had no one in that house guessed the feelings in his bosom she would have walked along the corridor as usual, and spoken a word with her sweet voice in answer to his word. He felt sure that this would be so no more; but who had stopped it, and why should such sounds be no more heard?

At last he did go to sleep, not in pursuance of any plan formed for doing so; for had he been asked he would have said that sleep was impossible for him. But he did go to sleep, and when he awoke it was dark. He had intended to have got up and dressed on that afternoon, or to have gone through such ceremony of dressing as was possible for him,—in preparation of his next day's exercise; and now he rose up in his bed with a start, angry with himself in having allowed the time to pass by him.

"Lord love you, Mr. Graham, why how you have slept!" said Mrs. Baker. "If I haven't just sent your dinner down again to keep hot. Such a beautiful pheasant, and the bread sauce'll be lumpy now, for all the world like pap."

"Never mind the bread sauce, Mrs. Baker;—the pheasant's the thing."

"And her ladyship's been here, Mr. Graham, only she wouldn't have you woke. She won't hear of your being moved to-morrow, nor yet won't the judge. There was a rumpus down stairs when Mr. Agusutus as much as mentioned it. I know one who——"

"You know one who—you were saying?"

"Never mind. It ain't one more than another, but it's all. You ain't to leave this to-morrow, so you may

just give it over. And indeed your things is all at the wash, so you can't;—and now I'll go down for the pheasant."

Felix still declared very positively that he should go, but his doing so did not shake Mrs Baker. The letter-bag he knew did not leave till eight, and as yet it was not much past five. He would see Staveley again after his dinner, and then he would write.

When Augustus left the room in the middle of the day he encountered Madeline wandering about the house. In these days she did wander about the house, as though there were something always to be done in some place apart from that in which she then was. And yet the things which she did were but few. She neither worked nor read, and as for household duties, her share in them was confined almost entirely to the morning and evening teapot.

"It isn't true that he's to go to-morrow morning, Augustus, is it?" said she.

"Who, Graham? Well; he says that he will. He is very anxious to get to London; and no doubt he finds it stupid enough lying there and doing nothing."

"But he can do as much there as he can lying by himself in his own chambers, where I don't suppose he would have anybody to look after him. He thinks he's a trouble and all that, and therefore he wants to go. But you know mamma doesn't mind about trouble of that kind; and what should we think of it afterwards if anything bad was to happen to your friend because we allowed him to leave the house before he was in a fit state to be moved? Of course Mr. Pottinger says so——" Mr. Pottinger was the doctor. "Of course Mr. Pottinger says so, because he thinks he has been so long here, and he doesn't understand."

"But Mr. Pottinger would like to keep a patient."

"Oh no; he's not at all that sort of man. He'd think of mamma,—the trouble I mean of having a stranger in the house. But you know mamma would think nothing of that, especially for such an intimate friend of yours."

Augustus turned slightly round so as to look more fully into his sister's face, and he saw that a tear was gathered in the corner of her eye. She perceived his glance and partly shrank under it, but she soon recovered herself and answered it. "I know what you mean," she said, "and if you choose to think so, I can't help it. But it is horrible—horrible——" and then she stopped herself, finding that a little sob would become audible if she trusted herself to further words.

"You know what I mean, Mad?" he said, putting his arm affectionately round her waist. "And what is it that I mean? Come; you and I never have any secrets;—you always say so when you want to get at mine. Tell me what it is that I mean."

"I haven't got any secret."

"But what did I mean?"

"You looked at me, because I don't want you to let them send Mr. Graham away. If it was old Mr. Furnival I shouldn't like them to turn him out of this house when he was in such a state as that."

"Poor Mr. Furnival; no; I think he would bear it worse than Felix."

"Then why should he go? And why—should you look at me in that way?"

"Did I look at you, Mad? Well, I believe I did. We are to have no secrets; are we?"

"No," said she. But she did not say it in the same

eager voice with which hitherto she had declared that they would always tell each other everything.

"Felix Graham is my friend," said he, "my special friend; and I hope you will always like my friends. But——"

"Well?" she said.

"You know what I mean, Mad."

"Yes," she said.

"That is all, dearest." And then she knew that he also had cautioned her not to fall in love with Felix Graham, and she felt angry with him for the caution. "Why—why—why——?" But she hardly knew as yet how to frame the question which she desired to ask herself.

CHAPTER XIII

"I CALL IT AWFUL"

"OH indeed!" Those had been the words with which Mr. Furnival had received the announcement made by Sir Peregrine as to his proposed nuptials. And as he uttered them the lawyer drew himself up stiffly in his chair, looking much more like a lawyer and much less like an old family friend than he had done the moment before.

Whereupon Sir Peregrine drew himself up also. "Yes," he said. "I should be intrusive if I were to trouble you with my motives, and therefore I need only say further as regards the lady, that I trust that my support, standing as I shall do in the position of her husband, will be more serviceable to her than it could otherwise have been in this trial which she will, I presume, be forced to undergo."

"No doubt; no doubt," said Mr. Furnival; and then the interview had ended. The lawyer had been anxious to see his client, and had intended to ask permission to do so; but he had felt on hearing Sir Peregrine's tidings that it would be useless now to make any attempt to see her alone, and that he could speak to her with no freedom in Sir Peregrine's presence. So he left The Cleeve, having merely intimated to the baronet the fact of his having engaged the services of Mr. Chaffanbrass and Mr. Solomon Aram. "You will not see Lady Mason?" Sir Peregrine had asked. "Thank

you: I do not know that I need trouble her," Mr. Furnival had answered. "You of course will explain to her how the case at present stands. I fear she must reconcile herself to the fact of a trial. You are aware, Sir Peregrine, that the offence imputed is one for which bail will be taken. I should propose yourself and her son. Of course I should be happy to lend my own name, but as I shall be on the trial, perhaps it may be as well that this should be avoided."

Bail will be taken! These words were dreadful in the ears of the expectant bridegroom. Had it come to this; that there was a question whether or no she should be locked up in a prison, like a felon? But nevertheless his heart did not misgive him. Seeing how terribly she was injured by others, he felt himself bound by the stronger law to cling to her himself. Such was the special chivalry of the man.

Mr. Furnival on his return to London thought almost more of Sir Peregrine than he did either of Lady Mason or of himself. Was it not a pity? Was it not a thousand pities that that aged noble gentleman should be sacrificed? He had felt angry with Sir Peregrine when the tidings were first communicated to him; but now, as he journeyed up to London this feeling of anger was transferred to his own client. This must be her doing, and such doing on her part, while she was in her present circumstances was very wicked. And then he remembered her guilt,—her probable guilt, and his brow became very black. Her supposed guilt had not been horrible to him while he had regarded it as affecting herself alone, and in point of property affecting Joseph Mason and her son Lucius. He could look forward, sometimes almost triumphantly, to the idea of washing her—so far as

this world's washing goes—from that guilt, and setting her up again clear before the world, even though in doing so he should lend a hand in robbing Joseph Mason of his estate. But this dragging down of another—and such another—head into the vortex of ruin and misery was horrible to him. He was not straitlaced, or mealy-mouthed, or overburthened with scruples. In the way of his profession he could do many a thing at which—I express a single opinion with much anxious deference—at which an honest man might be scandalised if it became beneath his judgment unprofessionally. But this he could not stand. Something must be done in the matter. The marriage must be stayed till after the trial,—or else he must himself retire from the defence and explain both to Lady Mason and to Sir Peregrine why he did so.

And then he thought of the woman herself, and this spirit within him became very bitter. Had any one told him that he was jealous of the preference shown by his client to Sir Peregrine, he would have fumed with anger, and thought that he was fuming justly. But such was in truth the case. Though he believed her to have been guilty of this thing, though he believed her to be now guilty of the worse offence of dragging the baronet to his ruin, still he was jealous of her regard. Had she been content to lean upon him, to trust to him as her great and only necessary friend, he could have forgiven all else, and placed at her service the full force of his professional power,—even though by doing so he might have lowered himself in men's minds. And what reward did he expect? None. He had formed no idea that the woman would become his mistress. All that was as obscure before his mind's

eye, as though she had been nineteen and he five and twenty.

He was to dine at home on this day, that being the first occasion of his doing so for—as Mrs. Furnival declared—the last six months. In truth, however, the interval had been long, though not so long as that. He had a hope that having announced his intention, he might find the coast clear and hear Martha Biggs spoken of as a dear one lately gone. But when he arrived at home Martha Biggs was still there. Under circumstances as they now existed Mrs. Furnival had determined to keep Martha Biggs by her, unless any special edict for her banishment should come forth. Then, in case of such special edict, Martha Biggs should go, and thence should arise the new *casus belli*. Mrs. Furnival had made up her mind that war was expedient,—nay, absolutely necessary. She had an idea, formed no doubt from the reading of history, that some allies require a smart brush now and again to blow away the clouds of distrust which become engendered by time between them; and that they may become better allies than ever afterwards. If the appropriate time for such a brush might ever come, it had come now. All the world,—so she said to herself,—was talking of Mr. Furnival and Lady Mason. All the world knew of her injuries.

Martha Biggs was second cousin to Mr. Crook's brother's wife—I speak of that Mr. Crook who had been professionally known for the last thirty years as the partner of Mr. Round. It had been whispered in the office in Bedford Row—such whisper I fear originating with old Round—that Mr. Furnival admired his fair client. Hence light had fallen upon the eyes of Martha Biggs, and the secret of her friend

was known to her. Need I trace the course of the tale with closer accuracy?

"Oh, Kitty," she had said to her friend with tears that evening—"I cannot bear to keep it to myself any more! I cannot when I see you suffering so. It's awful."

"Cannot bear to keep what, Martha?"

"Oh, I know. Indeed all the town knows it now."

"Knows what? You know how I hate that kind of thing. If you have anything to say, speak out."

This was not kind to such a faithful friend as Martha Biggs; but Martha knew what sacrifices friendship such as hers demanded, and she did not resent it.

"Well, then;—if I am to speak out, it's—Lady Mason. And I do say that it's shameful, quite shameful;—and awful; I call it awful."

Mrs. Furnival had not said much at the time to encourage the fidelity of her friend, but she was thus justified in declaring to herself that her husband's goings on had become the talk of all the world;—and his goings on especially in that quarter in which she had long regarded them with so much dismay. She was not therefore prepared to welcome him on this occasion of his coming home to dinner by such tokens of friendly feeling as the dismissal of her friend to Red Lion Square. When the moment for absolute war should come Martha Biggs should be made to depart.

Mr. Furnival when he arrived at his own house was in a thoughtful mood, and disposed for quiet and domestic meditation. Had Miss Biggs not been there he could have found it in his heart to tell everything about Lady Mason to his wife, asking her counsel as to what he should do with reference to that marriage

Could he have done so, all would have been well; but this was not possible while that red-faced lump of a woman from Red Lion Square sat in his drawing-room, making everything uncomfortable.

The three sat down to dinner together, and very little was said between them. Mr. Furnival did try to be civil to his wife, but wives sometimes have a mode of declining such civilities without committing themselves to overt acts of war. To Miss Biggs Mr. Furnival could not bring himself to say anything civil, seeing that he hated her; but such words as he did speak to her she received with grim griffin-like austerity, as though she were ever meditating on the awfulness of his conduct. And so in truth she was. Why his conduct was more awful in her estimation since she had heard Lady Mason's name mentioned, than when her mind had been simply filled with general ideas of vague conjugal infidelity, I cannot say; but such was the case. "I call it awful," were the first words she again spoke when she found herself once more alone with Mrs. Furnival in the drawing-room. And then she sat down over the fire, thinking neither of her novel nor her knitting, with her mind deliciously filled with the anticipation of coming catastrophes.

"If I sit up after half-past ten would you mind going to bed?" said Mrs. Furnival, when they had been in the drawing-room about ten minutes.

"Oh no, not in the least," said Miss Biggs. "I'll be sure to go." But she thought it very unkind, and she felt as a child does who is deceived in a matter of being taken to the play. If no one goes the child can bear it. But to see others go, and to be left behind, is too much for the feelings of any child,—or of Martha Biggs.

Mr. Furnival had no inclination for sitting alone over his wine on this occasion. Had it been possible for him he would have preferred to have gone quickly up stairs, and to have taken his cup of coffee from his wife's hand with some appreciation of domestic comfort. But there could be no such comfort to him while Martha Biggs was there, so he sat down stairs, sipping his port according to his custom, and looking into the fire for a solution of his difficulties about Lady Mason.

He began to wish that he had never seen Lady Mason. and to reflect that the intimate friendship of pretty women often brings with it much trouble. He was resolved on one thing. He would not go down into court and fight that battle for Lady Orme. Were he to do so the matter would have taken quite a different phase,—one that he had not at all anticipated. In case that his present client should then have become Lady Orme, Mr. Chaffanbrass and Mr. Solomon Aram might carry on the battle between them, with such assistance as they might be able to get from Messrs. Slow and Bideawhile. He became angry as he drank his port, and in his anger he swore that it should be so. And then as his anger became hot at the close of his libations, he remembered that Martha Biggs was up stairs, and became more angry still. And thus when he did go into the drawing-room at some time in the evening not much before ten, he was not in a frame of mind likely to bring about domestic comfort.

He walked across the drawing-room, sat down in an arm-chair by the table, and took up the last number of a review, without speaking to either of them. Whereupon Mrs. Furnival began to ply her needle which had been lying idly enough upon her work, and Martha

Biggs fixed her eyes intently upon her book. So they sat twenty minutes without a word being spoken, and then Mrs. Furnival inquired of her lord whether he chose to have tea.

"Of course I shall,—when you have it," said he.

"Don't mind us," said Mrs. Furnival.

"Pray don't mind me," said Martha Biggs. "Don't let me be in the way."

"No, I won't," said Mr. Furnival. Whereupon Miss Biggs again jumped up in her chair as though she had been electrified. It may be remembered that on a former occasion Mr. Furnival had sworn at her—or at least in her presence.

"You need not be rude to a lady in your own house, because she is my friend," said Mrs. Furnival.

"Bother," said Mr. Furnival. "And now if we are going to have any tea, let us have it."

"I don't think I'll mind about tea to-night, Mrs. Furnival," said Miss Biggs, having received a notice from her friend's eye that it might be well for her to depart. "My head aches dreadful, and I shall be better in bed. Good-night, Mrs. Furnival." And then she took her candle and went away.

For the next five minutes there was not a word said. No tea had been ordered, although it had been mentioned. Mrs. Furnival had forgotten it among the hot thoughts that were running through her mind, and Mr. Furnival was indifferent upon the subject. He knew that something was coming, and he resolved that he would have the upper hand let that something be what it might. He was being ill used,—so he said to himself—and would not put up with it.

At last the battle began. He was not looking but he heard her first movement as she prepared herself.

"Tom!" she said, and then the voice of the war goddess was again silent. He did not choose to answer her at the instant, and then the war goddess rose from her seat and again spoke. "Tom!" she said, standing over him and looking at him.

"What is it you mean?" said he, allowing his eyes to rise to her face over the top of his book.

"Tom!" she said for the third time.

"I'll have no nonsense, Kitty," said he. "If you have anything to say, say it."

Even then she had intended to be affectionate,—had so intended at the first commencement of her address. She had no wish to be a war goddess. But he had assisted her attempt at love by no gentle word, by no gentle look, by no gentle motion. "I have this to say," she replied; "you are disgracing both yourself and me, and I will not remain in this house to be a witness to it."

"Then you may go out of the house." These words, be it remembered, were uttered not by the man himself, but by the spirit of port wine within the man.

"Tom, do you say that;—after all?"

"By Heavens I do say it! I'll not be told in my cwn drawing-room, even by you, that I am disgracing myself."

"Then why do you go after that woman down to Hamworth? All the world is talking of you. At your age too! You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I can't stand this," said he, getting up and throwing the book from him right across the drawing-room floor; "and, by Heavens! I won't stand it."

"Then why do you do it, Sir?"

"Kitty, I believe the devil must have entered into you to drive you mad."

"Oh, oh, oh! very well, Sir. The devil in the shape of drink and lust has entered into you. But you may understand this; I—will—not—consent to live with you while such deeds as these are being done." And then without waiting for another word, she stormed out of the room.

CHAPTER XIV

HOW CAN I SAVE HIM?

"I WILL not consent to live with you while such deeds as these are being done." Such were the last words which Mrs. Furnival spoke as she walked out of her own drawing-room, leaving her husband still seated in his arm-chair.

What was he to do? Those who would hang by the letter of the law in such matters may say that he should have rung the bell, sent for his wife, explained to her that obedience was a necessary duty on her part, and have finished by making her understand that she must and would continue to live wherever he chose that she should live. There be those who say that if a man be anything of a man, he can always insure obedience in his own household. He has the power of the purse and the power of the law; and if, having these, he goes to the wall, it must be because he is a poor creature. Those who so say have probably never tried the position.

Mr. Furnival did not wish to send for his wife, because by doing so he would have laid bare his sore before his servants. He could not follow her, because he knew that he should not find her alone in her room. Nor did he wish for any further parley, because he knew that she would speak loud, and probably sob—nay, very possibly proceed to a fainting fit. And, moreover, he much doubted whether he would have the

power to keep her in the house if it should be her pleasure to leave it. And then what should he do? The doing of something in such a catastrophe was, he thought, indispensable.

Was ever a man so ill treated? Was ever jealousy so groundless? Here was a woman, with whom he was on the point of quarreling who was engaged to be married to another man, whom for months past he had only seen as a client; and on her account he was to be told by his wife that she would not consent to live with him! Yes; it was quite indispensable that he should do something.

At last he went to bed, and slept upon it; not sharing the marital couch, but occupying his own dressing-room. In the morning, however, as he sat down to his solitary breakfast, he was as far as ever from having made up his mind what that something should be. A message was brought to him by an elderly female servant with a grave face,—the elderly servant who had lived with them since their poorer days,—saying that “Missus would not come down to breakfast this morning.” There was no love sent, no excuse as to illness, no resemblance of a peaceable reason, assumed even to deceive the servant. It was clear to Mr. Furnival that the servant was intended to know all about it. “And Miss Biggs says, Sir, that if you please you’re not to wait for her.”

“Very well, that’ll do,” said Mr. Furnival, who had not the slightest intention of waiting for Miss Biggs; and then he sat himself down to eat his bacon, and bethink himself what step he would take with this recreant and troublesome spouse.

While he was thus employed the post came. The bulk of his letters as a matter of course went to his

chambers; but there were those among his correspondents who wrote to him at Harley Street. To-day he received three or four letters, but our concern will be with one only. This one bore the Hamworth post-mark, and he opened it the first, knowing that it came from Lady Mason. It was as follows:—

“Private. “THE CLEEVE, 23rd January, 18—.

“MY DEAR MR. FURNIVAL,

“I am so very sorry that I did not see you to-day! Indeed, your leaving without seeing me has made me unhappy, for I cannot but think that it shows that you are displeased. Under these circumstances I must write to you and explain to you how that came to pass which Sir Peregrine told you. I have not let him know that I am writing to you, and I think for his sake that I had better not. But he is so good, and has shown to me such nobleness and affection, that I can hardly bring myself to have any secret from him.

“You may conceive what was my surprise when I first understood that he wished to make me his wife. It is hardly six months since I thought that I was almost exceeding my station in visiting at his house. Then by degrees I began to be received as a friend, and at last I found myself treated with the warmest love. But still I had no thought of this, and I knew that it was because of my great trouble that Sir Peregrine and Mrs. Orme were so good to me.

“When he sent for me into his library and told me what he wished, I could not refuse him anything. I promised obedience to him as though I were a child; and in this way I found myself engaged to be his wife. When he told me that he would have it so, how could I refuse him, knowing as I do all that he has done for

me, and thinking of it as I do every minute? As for loving him, of course I love him. Who that knows him does not love him? He is made to be loved. No one is so good and so noble as he. But of love of that sort I had never dreamed. Ah me, no!—a woman burdened as I am does not think of love.

“He told me that he would have it so, and I said that I would obey him; and he tried to prove to me that in this dreadful trial it would be better for me. But I would not wish it on that account. He has done enough for me without my causing him such injury. When I argued it with him, trying to say that others would not like it, he declared that Mrs. Orme would be well pleased, and, indeed, so she told me afterwards herself. And thus I yielded to him, and agreed that I would be his wife. But I was not happy, thinking that I should injure him; and I promised only because I could not deny him.

“But the day before yesterday young Mr. Orme, his grandson, came to me and told me that such a marriage would be very wrong. And I do believe him. He said that old family friends would look down upon his grandfather and ridicule him if he were to make this marriage. And I can see that it would be so. I would not have such injury come upon him for the gain of all the world to myself. So I have made up my mind to tell him that it cannot be, even though I should anger him. And I fear that it will anger him, for he loves to have his own way,—especially in doing good; and he thinks that our marriage would rescue me altogether from the danger of this trial.

“So I have made up my mind to tell him, but I have not found courage to do it yet; and I do wish, dear Mr. Furnival, that I might see you first. I fear that I may

have lost your friendship by what has already been done. If so, what will become of me? When I heard that you had gone without asking for me, my heart sank within me. I have two friends whom I so dearly love, and I would fain do as both direct me, if that may be possible. And now I propose to go up to London to-morrow, and to be at your chambers about one o'clock. I have told Sir Peregrine and Mrs. Orme that I am going; but he is too noble-minded to ask questions now that he thinks I may feel myself constrained to tell him. So I will call in Lincoln's Inn at one o'clock, and I trust that if possible you will see me. I am greatly in want of your advice, for in truth I hardly know what to do.

"Pray believe me to be always your attached friend,

"MARY MASON."

There was hardly a word,—I believe not a word in that letter that was not true. Her acceptance of Sir Peregrine had been given exactly in the manner and for the reasons there explained; and since she had accepted him she had been sorry for having done so, exactly in the way now described. She was quite willing to give up her husband if it was thought best,—but she was not willing to give up her friend. She was not willing to give up either friend, and her great anxiety was so to turn her conduct that she might keep them both.

Mr. Furnival was gratified as he read the letter—gratified in spite of his present frame of mind. Of course he would see her;—and of course, as he himself well knew, would take her again into favour. But he must insist on her carrying out her purpose of abandoning the marriage project. If, arising from this

abandonment, there should be any coolness on the part of Sir Peregrine, Mr. Furnival would not regret it. Mr. Furnival did not feel quite sure whether in the conduct of this case he was not somewhat hampered by the energetic zeal of Sir Peregrine's line of defence.

When he had finished the perusal of his letter and the consideration which it required, he put it carefully into his breast coat pocket, envelope and all. What might not happen if he left that envelope about in that house? And then he took it out again, and observed upon the cover the Hamworth post-mark, very clear. Post-marks nowadays are very clear, and everybody may know whence a letter comes. His letters had been brought to him by the butler; but was it not probable that that ancient female servant might have seen them first, and have conveyed to her mistress intelligence as to this post-mark? If so——; and Mr. Furnival almost felt himself to be guilty as he thought of it.

While he was putting on his great-coat in the hall, the butler assisting him, the ancient female servant came to him again. There was a look about her face which told of war, and declared her to be, if not the chief lieutenant of his wife, at any rate her colour-sergeant. Martha Biggs no doubt was chief lieutenant. "Missus desires me to ask," said she, with her grim face and austere voice, "whether you will be pleased to dine at home to-day?" And yet the grim, austere woman could be affectionate and almost motherly in her ministration to him when things were going well, and had eaten his salt and broken his bread for more than twenty years. All this was very hard! "Because," continued the woman, "missus says she thinks ~~she~~ shall be out this evening herself."

"Where is she going?"

"Missus didn't tell me, Sir."

He almost determined to go up stairs and call upon her to tell him what she was going to do, but remembered that if he did it would surely make a row in the house. Miss Biggs would put her head out of some adjacent door and scream, "Oh laws!" and he would have to descend his own stairs with the consciousness that all his household were regarding him as a brute. So he gave up that project. "No," he said, "I shall not dine at home;" and then he went his way.

"Missus is very aggravating," said the butler, as soon as the door was closed.

"You don't know what cause she has, Spooner," said the housekeeper very solemnly.

"Is it at his age? I believe it's all nonsense, I do;—feminine fancies, and vagaries of the weaker sex."

"Yes, I dare say; that's what you men always say. But if he don't look out he'll find missus'll be too much for him. What'd he do if she were to go away from him?"

"Do?—why live twice as jolly. It would only be the first rumpus of the thing."

I am afraid that there was some truth in what Spooner said. It is the first rumpus of the thing, or rather the fear of that, which keeps together many a couple.

At one o'clock there came a timid female rap at Mr. Furnival's chamber door, and the juvenile clerk gave admittance to Lady Mason. Crabwitz, since the affair of that mission down at Hamworth, had so far carried a point of his, that a junior satellite was now permanently installed; and for the future the indignity of opening doors, and "just stepping out" into Chancery

Lane, would not await him. Lady Mason was dressed all in black,—but this was usual with her when she left home. To-day, however, there was about her something blacker and more sombre than usual. The veil which she wore was thick, and completely hid her face; and her voice, as she asked for Mr. Furnival, was low and plaintive. But, nevertheless, she had by no means laid aside the charm of womanhood; or it might be more just to say that the charm of womanhood had not laid aside her. There was that in her figure, step, and gait of going which compelled men to turn round and look at her. We all know that she had a son some two or three and twenty years of age, and that she had not been quite a girl when she married. But, notwithstanding this, she was yet young; and though she made no effort—no apparent effort—to maintain the power and influence which beauty gives, yet she did maintain it.

He came forward and took her by the hand with all his old affectionate regard, and, muttering some words of ordinary salutation, led her to a chair. It may be that she muttered something also, but if so the sound was too low to reach his ears. She sat down where he placed her, and as she put her hand on the table near his arm, he saw that she was trembling.

“I got your letter this morning,” he said, by way of beginning the conversation.

“Yes,” she said; and then, finding that it was not possible that he should hear her through her veil, she raised it. She was very pale, and there was a look of painful care, almost of agony, round her mouth. He had never seen her look so pale,—but he said to himself at the same time that he had never seen her look so beautiful.

"And to tell you the truth, Lady Mason, I was very glad to get it. You and I had better speak openly to each other about this;—had we not?"

"Oh, yes," she said. And then there was a struggle within her not to tremble—a struggle that was only too evident. She was aware of this, and took her hand off the table.

"I vexed you because I did not see you at The Cleeve the other day."

"Because I thought that you were angry with me."

"And I was so."

"Oh, Mr. Furnival!"

"Wait a moment, Lady Mason. I was angry;—or rather sorry and vexed to hear of that which I did not approve. But your letter has removed that feeling. I can now understand the manner in which this engagement was forced upon you; and I understand also—do I not?—that the engagement will not be carried out?"

She did not answer him immediately, and he began to fear that she repented of her purpose. "Because," said he, "under no other circumstances could I——"

"Stop, Mr. Furnival. Pray do not be severe with me." And she looked at him with eyes which would almost have melted his wife,—and which he was quite unable to withstand. Had it been her wish, she might have made him promise to stand by her, even though she had persisted in her engagement.

"No, no; I will not be severe."

"I do not wish to marry him," she went on to say. "I have resolved to tell him so. That was what I said in my letter."

"Yes, yes."

"I do not wish to marry him. I would not bring

his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave—no, not to save myself from——” And then, as she thought of that from which she desired to save herself, she trembled again, and was silent.

“It would create in men’s minds such a strong impression against you, were you to marry him at this moment!”

“It is of him I am thinking;—of him and Lucius. Mr. Furnival, they might do their worst with me, if it were not for that thought. My boy!” And then she rose from her chair, and stood upright before him, as though she were going to do or say some terrible thing. He still kept his chair, for he was startled, and hardly knew what he would be about. That last exclamation had come from her almost with a shriek, and now her bosom was heaving as though her heart would burst with the violence of her sobbing. “I will go,” she said. “I had better go.” And she hurried away towards the door.

“No, no; do not go yet.” And he rose to stop her, but she was quite passive. “I do not know why you should be so much moved now.” But he did know. He did understand the very essence and core of her feelings;—as probably may the reader also. But it was impossible that he should allow her to leave him in her present state.

She sat down again, and leaning both her arms upon the table, hid her face within her hands. He was now standing, and for the moment did not speak to her. Indeed he could not bring himself to break the silence, for he saw her tears, and could still hear the violence of her sobs. And then she was the first to speak. “If it were not for him,” she said, raising her head, “I could bear it all. What will he do? what will he do?”

"You mean," said Mr. Furnival, speaking very slowly, "if the—verdict—should go against us."

"It will go against us," she said. "Will it not?—tell me the truth. You are so clever, you must know. Tell me how it will go. Is there anything I can do to save him?" And she took hold of his arm with both her hands, and looked up eagerly—oh, with such terrible eagerness,—into his face.

Would it not have been natural now that he should have asked her to tell him the truth? And yet he did not dare to ask her. He thought that he knew it. He felt sure,—almost sure, that he could look into her very heart, and read there the whole of her secret. But still there was a doubt,—enough of doubt to make him wish to ask the question. Nevertheless he did not ask it.

"Mr. Furnival," she said; and as she spoke there was a hardness came over the soft lines of her feminine face; a look of courage which amounted almost to ferocity, a look which at the moment recalled to his mind, as though it were but yesterday, the attitude and countenance she had borne as she stood in the witness-box at that other trial, now so many years since,—that attitude and countenance which had impressed the whole court with so high an idea of her courage.

"Mr. Furnival, weak as I am, I could bear to die here on the spot,—now—if I could only save him from this agony. It is not for myself I suffer." And then the terrible idea occurred to him that she might attempt to compass her escape by death. But he did not know her. That would have been no escape for her son.

"And you too think that I must not marry him?"

she said, putting up her hands to her brows as though to collect her thoughts.

"No; certainly not, Lady Mason."

"No, no. It would be wrong. But, Mr. Furnival, I am so driven that I know not how I should act. What if I should lose my mind?" And as she looked at him there was that about her eyes which did tell him that such an ending might be possible.

"Do not speak in such a way," he said.

"No, I will not. I know that it is wrong. I will go down there, and tell him that it must not,—must not be so. But I may stay at The Cleeve;—may I not?"

"Oh, certainly—if he wishes it,—after your understanding with him."

"Ah; he may turn me out, may he not? And they are so kind to me, so gentle and so good. And Lucius is so stern. But I will go back. Sternness will perhaps be better for me now than love and kindness."

In spite of everything, in the teeth of his almost certain conviction of her guilt, he would now, even now, have asked her to come to his own house, and have begged her to remain there till the trial was over,—if only he had had the power to do so. What would it be to him what the world might say, if she should be proved guilty? Why should not he have been mistaken as well as others? And he had an idea that if he could get her into his own hands he might still bring her through triumphantly,—with assistance from Solomon Aram and Chaffanbrass. He was strongly convinced of her guilt, but by no means strongly convinced that her guilt could be proved. But then he had no house at the present moment that he could call his own. His Kitty, the Kitty of whom he still sometimes thought with affection,—that Kitty

whose soft motherly heart would have melted at such a story of a woman's sorrow, if only it had been rightly approached,—that Kitty was now vehemently hostile, hostile both to him and to this very woman for whom he would have asked her care.

“May God help me!” said the poor woman. “I do not know where else to turn for aid. Well; I may go now then. And, indeed, why should I take up your time further?”

But before she did go, Mr. Furnival gave her much counsel. He did not ask as to her guilt, but he did give her that advice which he would have thought most expedient had her guilt been declared and owned. He told her that very much would depend on her maintaining her present position and standing; that she was so to carry herself as not to let people think that she was doubtful about the trial; and that above all things she was to maintain a composed and steadfast manner before her son. As to the Ormes, he bade her not to think of leaving The Cleeve, unless she found that her remaining there would be disagreeable to Sir Peregrine after her explanation with him. That she was to decline the marriage engagement, he was very positive; on that subject there was to be no doubt.

And then she went; and as she passed down the dark passage into the new square by the old gate of the Chancellor's court, she met a stout lady. The stout lady eyed her savagely, but was not quite sure as to her identity. Lady Mason in her trouble passed the stout lady without taking any notice of her.

CHAPTER XV

JOHN KENNEBY GOES TO HAMWORTH

WHEN John Kenneby dined with his sister and brother-in-law on Christmas Day he agreed, at the joint advice of the whole party there assembled, that he would go down and see Mr. Dockwrath at Hamworth, in accordance with the invitation received from that gentleman;—his enemy, Dockwrath, who had carried off Miriam Usbech, for whom John Kenneby still sighed,—in a gentle easy manner indeed,—but still sighed as though it were an affair but of yesterday. But though he had so agreed, and though he had never stirred from that resolve, he by no means did it immediately. He was a slow man, whose life had offered him but little excitement; and the little which came to him was husbanded well and made to go a long way. He thought about this journey for nearly a month before he took it, often going to his sister and discussing it with her, and once or twice seeing the great Moulder himself. At last he fixed a day and did go down to Hamworth.

He had, moreover, been invited to the offices of Messrs. Round and Crook, and that visit also was as yet unpaid. A clerk from the house in Bedford Row had found him out at Hubbles and Grease's, and had discovered that he would be forthcoming as a witness. On the special subject of his evidence not much had then passed, the clerk having had no discretion given him to sift the matter. But Kenneby had promised to

go to Bedford Row, merely stipulating for a day at some little distance of time. That day was now near at hand; but he was to see Dockwrath first, and hence it occurred that he now made his journey to Hamworth.

But another member of that Christmas party at Great St. Helen's had not been so slow in carrying out his little project. Mr. Kantwise had at once made up his mind that it would be as well that he should see Dockwrath. It would not suit him to incur the expense of a journey to Hamworth, even with the additional view of extracting payment for that set of metallic furniture; but he wrote to the attorney telling him that he should be in London in the way of trade on such and such a day, and that he had tidings of importance to give with reference to the great Orley Farm case. Dockwrath did see him, and the result was that Mr. Kantwise got his money, fourteen eleven;—at least he got fourteen seven six, and had a very hard fight for the three odd half-crowns,—and Dockwrath learned that John Kenneby, if duly used, would give evidence on his side of the question.

And then Kenneby did go down to Hamworth. He had not seen Miriam Usbech since the days of her marriage. He had remained hanging about the neighbourhood long enough to feast his eyes with the agony of looking at the bride, and then he had torn himself away. Circumstances since that had carried him one way and Miriam another, and they had never met. Time had changed him very little, and what change time had made was perhaps for the better. He hesitated less when he spoke, he was less straggling and undecided in his appearance, and had about him more of manhood than in former days. But poor Miriam had certainly not been altered for the better by years

and circumstances as far as outward appearance went. Kenneby as he walked up from the station to the house,—and from old remembrances he knew well where the house stood,—gave up his mind entirely to the thought of seeing Miriam, and in his memories of old love passages almost forgot the actual business which now brought him to the place. To him it seemed as though he was going to meet the same Miriam he had left,—the Miriam to whom in former days he had hardly ventured to speak of love, and to whom he must not now venture so to speak at all. He almost blushed as he remembered that he would have to take her hand.

There are men of this sort, men slow in their thoughts but very keen in their memories; men who will look for the glance of a certain bright eye from a window-pane, though years have rolled on since last they saw it,—since last they passed that window. Such men will bethink themselves, after an interval of weeks, how they might have brought up wit to their use and improved an occasion which chance had given them. But when the bright eyes do glance, such men pass by abashed; and when the occasion offers, their wit is never at hand. Nevertheless they are not the least happy of mankind, these never-readies; they do not pick up sudden prizes, but they hold fast by such good things as the ordinary run of life bestows upon them. There was a lady even now, a friend of Mrs. Moulder, ready to bestow herself and her fortune on John Kenneby,—a larger fortune than Miriam had possessed, and one which would not now probably be neutralised by so large a family as poor Miriam had bestowed upon her husband.

How would Miriam meet him? It was of this he

thought as he approached the door. Of course he must call her Mrs. Dockwrath, though the other name was so often on his tongue. He had made up his mind, for the last week past, that he would call at the the private door of the house, passing by the door of the office. Otherwise the chances were that he would not see Miriam at all. His enemy, Dockwrath, would be sure to keep him from her presence. Dockwrath had ever been inordinately jealous. But when he came to the office-door he hardly had the courage to pass on to that of the private dwelling. His heart beat too quickly, and the idea of seeing Miriam was almost too much for him. But, nevertheless, he did carry out his plan, and did knock at the door of the house.

And it was opened by Miriam herself. He knew her instantly, in spite of all the change. He knew her, but the whole course of his feelings was altered at the moment, and his blood was made to run the other way. And she knew him too. "La, John," she said, "who'd have thought of seeing you?" And she shifted the baby whom she carried from one arm to the other as she gave him her hand in token of welcome.

"It is a long time since we met," he said. He felt hardly any temptation now to call her Miriam. Indeed it would have seemed altogether in opposition to the common order of things to do so. She was no longer Miriam, but the maternal Dockwrath;—the mother of that long string of dirty children whom he saw gathered in the passage behind her. He had known as a fact that she had all the children, but the fact had not made the proper impression on his mind till he had seen them.

"A long time! 'Deed then it is. Why we've hardly seen each other since you used to be a courting of me;

have we? But, my! John; why haven't you got a wife for yourself these many years? But come in. I'm glad to see every bit of you, so I am; though I've hardly a place to put you to sit down in." And then she opened a door, and took him into a little sitting-room on the left-hand side of the passage.

His feeling of intense enmity to Dockwrath was beginning to wear away, and one of modified friendship for the whole family was supervening. It was much better that it should be so. He could not understand before how Dockwrath had had the heart to write to him and call him John, but now he did understand it. He felt that he could himself be friendly with Dockwrath now, and forgive him all the injury; he felt also that it would not go so much against the grain with him to marry that friend as to whom his sister would so often solicit him.

"I think you may venture to sit down upon them," said Miriam, "though I can't say that I have ever tried myself." This speech referred to the chairs with which her room was supplied, and which Kenneby seemed to regard with suspicion.

"They are very nice I'm sure," said he, "but I don't think I ever saw any like them."

"Nor nobody else either. But don't you tell him so," and she nodded with her head to the side of the house on which the office stood. "I had as nice a set of mahoganys as ever a woman could want, and bought with my own money too, John; but he's took them away to furnish some of his lodgings opposite, and put them things here in their place. Don't, Sam; you'll have 'em all twisted about nohows in no time if you go to use 'em in that way."

"I wants to see the pictur' on the table," said Sam.

"Drat the picture," said Mrs. Dockwrath. "It was hard, wasn't it, John, to see my own mahoganys, as I had rubbed with my own hands till they was ever so bright, and as was bought with my own money too, took away and them things brought here? Sam, if you twist that round any more I'll box your ears. One can't hear oneself speak with the noise."

"They don't seem to be very useful," said Kenneby.

"Useful! They're got up for cheaterly;—that's what they are got up for. And that Dockwrath should be took in with 'em—he that's so sharp at everything,—that's what surprises me. But laws, John, it isn't the sharp ones that gets the best off. You was never sharp, but you're as smirk and smooth as though you came out of a bandbox. I am glad to see you, John, so I am." And she put her apron up to her eyes and wiped away a tear.

"Is Mr. Dockwrath at home?" said John.

"Sam, run round and see if your father's in the office. He'll be home to dinner, I know. Molly, do be quiet with your sister. I never see such a girl as you are for bothering. You didn't come down about bustness, did you, John?" And then Kenneby explained to her that he had been summoned by Dockwrath as to the matter of this Orley Farm trial. While he was doing so, Sam returned to say that his father had stepped out, but would be back in half an hour, and Mrs. Dockwrath, finding it impossible to make use of her company sitting-room, took her old lover into the family apartment which they all ordinarily occupied.

"You can sit down there at any rate without it at all crunching under you, up to nothing." And she emptied for him as she spoke the seat of an old well-worn horse-hair bottomed arm-chair. "As to them tin

things I wouldn't trust myself on one of them; and so I told him, angry as it made him. But now about poor Lady Mason——. Sam and Molly, you go into the garden, there's good children. They is so ready with their ears, John; and he contrives to get everything out of 'em. Now do tell me about this."

Kenneby could not help thinking that the love match between Miriam and her husband had not turned out in all respects well, and I fear that he derived from the thought a certain feeling of consolation. "He" was spoken about in a manner that did not betoken unflinching love and perfect confidence. Perhaps Miriam was at this moment thinking that she might have done better with her youth and her money! She was thinking of nothing of the kind. Her mind was one that dwelt on the present, not on the past. She was unhappy about her furniture, unhappy about the frocks of those four younger children, unhappy that the loaves of bread went faster and faster every day, very unhappy now at the savageness with which her husband prosecuted his anger against Lady Mason. But it did not occur to her to be unhappy because she had not become Mrs. Kenneby.

Mrs. Dockwrath had more to tell in the matter than had Kenneby, and when the elder of the children who were at home had been disposed of she was not slow to tell it. "Isn't it dreadful, John, to think that they should come against her now, and the will all settled as it was twenty year ago? But you won't say anything against her; will you now, John? She was always a good friend to you; wasn't she? Though it wasn't much use; was it?" It was thus that she referred to the business before them, and to the love passages of her early youth at the same time.

"It's a very dreadful affair," said Kenneby, very solemnly; "and the more I think of it the more dreadful it becomes."

"But you won't say anything against her, will you? You won't go over to his side; eh, John?"

"I don't know much about sides," said he.

"He'll get himself into trouble with it; I know he will. I do so wish you'd tell him, for he can't hurt you if you stand up to him. If I speak,—Lord bless you, I don't dare to call my soul my own for a week afterwards."

"Is he so very——"

"Oh, dreadful, John. He's bid me never speak a word to her. But for all that I used till she went away down to The Cleeve yonder. And what do you think they say now? And I do believe it too. They say that Sir Peregrine is going to make her his lady. If he does that it stands to reason that Dockwrath and Joseph Mason will get the worst of it. I'm sure I hope they will; only he'll be twice as hard if he don't make money by it in some way."

"Will he, now?"

"Indeed he will. You never knew anything like him for hardness if things go wrong awhile. I know he's got lots of money, because he's always buying up bits of houses; besides, what has he done with mine? but yet sometimes you'd hardly think he'd let me have bread enough for the children—and as for clothes——!" Poor Miriam! It seemed that her husband shared with her but few of the spoils or triumphs of his profession.

Tidings now came in from the office that Dockwrath was there. "You'll come round and eat a bit of dinner with us?" said she, hesitatingly. He felt that she hesi-

tated, and hesitated himself in his reply. "He must say something in the way of asking you, you know, and then say you'll come. His manner's nothing to you, you know. Do now. It does me good to look at you, John; it does indeed." And then, without making any promise, he left her and went round to the office.

Kenneby had made up his mind, talking over the matter with Moulder and his sister, that he would be very reserved in any communication which he might make to Dockwrath as to his possible evidence at the coming trial; but nevertheless when Dockwrath had got him into his office, the attorney made him give a succinct account of everything he knew, taking down his deposition in a regular manner. "And now if you'll just sign that," Dockwrath said to him when he had done.

"I don't know about signing," said Kenneby. "A man should never write his own name unless he knows why."

"You must sign your own deposition;" and the attorney frowned at him and looked savage. "What would a judge say to you in court if you had made such a statement as this, affecting the character of a woman like Lady Mason, and then had refused to sign it? You'd never be able to hold up your head again."

"Wouldn't I?" said Kenneby gloomily; and he did sign it. This was a great triumph to Dockwrath. Mat. Round had succeeded in getting the deposition of Bridget Bolster, but he had got that of John Kenneby.

"And now," said Dockwrath, "I'll tell you what we'll do;—we'll go to the Blue Posts—you remember the Blue Posts?—and I'll stand a beef steak and a glass of brandy and water. I suppose you'll go back to London by the 3 P. M. train. We shall have lots of time."

Kenneby said that he should go back by the 3 P. M. train, but he declined, with considerable hesitation, the beef steak and brandy and water. After what had passed between him and Miriam he could not go to the Blue Posts with her husband.

"Nonsense, man," said Dockwrath. "You must dine somewhere."

But Kenneby said that he should dine in London. He always preferred dining late. Besides, it was a long time since he had been at Hamworth, and he was desirous of taking a walk that he might renew his associations.

"Associations!" said Dockwrath with a sneer. According to his ideas a man could have no pleasant associations with a place unless he had made money there or been in some way successful. Now John Kenneby had enjoyed no success at Hamworth. "Well, then, if you prefer associations to the Blue Posts I'll say good-bye to you. I don't understand it myself. We shall see each other at the trial, you know." Kenneby with a sigh said that he supposed they should.

"Are you going into the house," said Dockwrath, "to see her again?" and he indicated with his head the side on which his wife was, as she before had indicated his side.

"Well, yes; I think I'll say good-bye."

"Don't be talking to her about this affair. She understands nothing about it, and everything goes up to that woman at Orley Farm." And so they parted.

"And he wanted you to go to the Blue Posts, did he?" said Miriam, when she heard of the proposition. "It's like him. If there is to be any money spent it's anywhere but at home."

"But I ain't going," said John.

“He’ll go before the day’s out, though he mayn’t get his dinner there. And he’ll be ever so free when he’s there. He’ll stand brandy and water to half Hamworth when he thinks he can get anything by it; but if you’ll believe me, John, though I’ve all the fag of the house on me, and all them children, I can’t get a pint of beer—not regular—betwixt breakfast and bedtime.” Poor Miriam! Why had she not taken advice when she was younger? John Kenneby would have given her what beer was good for her, quite regularly.

Then he went out and took his walk, sauntering away to the gate of Orley Farm, and looking up the avenue. He ventured up some way, and there at a distance before him he saw Lucius Mason walking up and down, from the house towards the road and back again, swinging a heavy stick in his hand, with his hat pressed down over his brows. Kenneby had no desire to speak to him; so he returned to the gate, and thence went back to the station, escaping the town by a side lane; and in this way he got back to London without holding further communication with the people of Hamworth.

CHAPTER XVI

JOHN KENNEBY'S COURTSHIP

"SHE's as sweet a temper, John, as ever stirred a lump of sugar in her tea," said Mrs. Moulder to her brother, as they sat together over the fire in Great St. Helen's on that same evening,—after his return from Ham-worth. "That she is,—and so Smiley always found her. 'She's always the same,' Smiley said to me many a day. And what can a man want more than that?"

"That's quite true," said John.

"And then as to her habits—I never knew her take a drop too much since first I set eyes on her, and that's nigh twenty years ago. She likes things comfortable; and why shouldn't she, with two hundred a year of her own coming out of the Kingsland Road brick-fields? As for dress, her things is beautiful, and she is the woman that takes care of 'em! Why, I remember an Irish tabinet as Smiley gave her when first that venture in the brick-fields came up money; if that tabinet is as much as turned yet, why, I'll eat it. And then the best of it is, she'll have you to-morrow. Indeed she will; or to-night, if you'll ask her. Goodness gracious! if there ain't Moulder!" And the excellent wife jumped up from her seat, poked the fire, emptied the most comfortable arm-chair, and hurried out to the landing at the top of the stairs. Presently the noise of a loudly wheezing pair of lungs was heard, and the commercial traveler, enveloped from head to foot in coats and comforters, made his appearance.

He had just returned from a journey, and having deposited his parcels and packages at the house of business of Hubbles and Grease in Houndsditch, had now returned to the bosom of his family. It was a way he had, not to let his wife know exactly the period of his return. Whether he thought that by so doing he might keep her always on the alert and ready for marital inspection, or whether he disliked to tie himself down by the obligation of a fixed time for his return, Mrs. Moulder had never made herself quite sure. But on neither view of the subject did she admire this practice of her lord. She had on many occasions pointed out to him how much more snug she could make him if he would only let her know when he was coming. But he had never taken the hint, and in these latter days she had ceased to give it.

"Why, I'm uncommon cold," he said in answer to his wife's inquiries after his welfare. "And so would you be too, if you'd come up from Leeds since you'd had your dinner. What, John, are you there? The two of you are making yourself snug enough, I suppose, with something hot?"

"Not a drop he's had yet since he's been in the house," said Mrs. Moulder. "And he's hardly as much as darkened the door since you left it." And Mrs. Moulder added, with some little hesitation in her voice, "Mrs. Smiley is coming in to-night, Moulder."

"The d—— she is! There's always something of that kind when I gets home tired out, and wants to be comfortable. I mean to have my supper to myself, as I likes it, if all the Mother Smileys in London choose to come in the way. What on earth is she coming here for this time of night?"

"Why, Moulder, you know."

"No; I don't know. I only know this that when a man's used up with business he don't want to have any of that nonsense under his nose."

"If you mean me——" began John Kenneby.

"I don't mean you: of course not; and I don't mean anybody. Here, take my coats, will you? and let me have a pair of slippers. If Mrs. Smiley thinks that I'm going to change my pants, or put myself about for her——"

"Laws, Moulder, she don't expect that."

"She won't get it, any way. Here's John dressed up as if he was going to a box in the the-atre. And you—why should you be going to expense, and knocking out things that costs money, because Mother Smiley's coming? I'll Smiley her."

"Now Moulder——" But Mrs. Moulder knew that it was of no use speaking to him at the present moment. Her task should be this,—to feed and cosset him if possible into good humour before her guest should arrive. Her praises of Mrs. Smiley had been very fairly true. But nevertheless she was a lady who had a mind and voice of her own, as any lady has a right to possess who draws in her own right two hundred a year out of a brick-field in the Kingsland Road. Such a one knows that she is above being snubbed, and Mrs. Smiley knew this of herself as well as any lady; and if Moulder, in his wrath, should call her Mother Smiley, or give her to understand that he regarded her as an old woman, that lady would probably walk herself off in great dudgeon,—herself and her share in the brick-field. To tell the truth, Mrs. Smiley required that considerable deference should be paid to her.

Mrs. Moulder knew well what was her husband's present ailment. He had dined as early as one, and

on his journey up from Leeds to London had refreshed himself with drink only. That last glass of brandy which he had taken at the Peterborough station had made him cross. If she could get him to swallow some hot food before Mrs. Smiley came, all might yet be well.

"And what's it to be, M.?" she said in her most insinuating voice—"there's a lovely chop down stairs, and there's nothing so quick as that."

"Chop!" he said, and it was all he did say at the moment.

"There's a 'am in beautiful cut," she went on, showing by the urgency of her voice how anxious she was on the subject.

For the moment he did not answer her at all, but sat facing the fire, and running his fat fingers through his uncombed hair. "Mrs. Smiley!" he said, "I remember when she was kitchen-maid at old Pott's."

"She ain't nobody's kitchen-maid now," said Mrs. Moulder, almost prepared to be angry in the defence of her friend.

"And I never could make out when it was that Smiley married her,—that is, if he ever did."

"Now, Moulder, that's shocking of you. Of course he married her. She and I is nearly an age as possible, though I think she is a year over me. She says not, and it ain't nothing to me. But I remember the wedding as if it was yesterday. You and I had never set eyes on each other then, M." This last she added in a plaintive tone, hoping to soften him.

"Are you going to keep me here all night without anything?" he then said. "Let me have some whisky,—hot, with;—and don't stand there looking at nothing."

"But you'll take some solids with it, Moulder? Why it stands to reason you'll be famished."

"Do as you're bid, will you, and give me the whisky. Are you going to tell me when I'm to eat and when I'm to drink, like a child?" This he said in that tone of voice which made Mrs. Moulder know that he meant to be obeyed; and though she was sure that he would make himself drunk, she was compelled to minister to his desires. She got the whisky and hot water, the lemon and sugar, and set the things beside him; and then she retired to the sofa. John Kenneby the while sat perfectly silent looking on. Perhaps he was considering whether he would be able to emulate the domestic management of Dockwrath or of Moulder when he should have taken to himself Mrs. Smiley and the Kingsland brick-field.

"If you've a mind to help yourself, John, I suppose you'll do it," said Moulder.

"None for me just at present, thank'ee," said Kenneby.

"I suppose you wouldn't swallow nothing less than wine in them togs?" said the other, raising his glass to his lips. "Well, here's better luck, and I'm blessed if it's not wanting. I'm pretty well tired of this go, and so I mean to let 'em know pretty plainly."

All this was understood by Mrs. Moulder, who knew that it only signified that her husband was half tipsy, and that in all probability he would be whole tipsy before long. There was no help for it. Were she to remonstrate with him in his present mood, he would very probably fling the bottle at her head. Indeed, remonstrances were never of avail with him. So she sat herself down, thinking how she would run down when she heard Mrs. Smiley's step, and beg that lady

to postpone her visit. Indeed it would be well to send John to convey her home again.

Moulder swallowed his glass of hot toddy fast, and then mixed another. His eyes were very bloodshot, and he sat staring at the fire. His hands were thrust into his pockets between the periods of his drinking, and he no longer spoke to any one. "I'm —— if I stand it," he growled forth, addressing himself. "I've stood it a —— deal too long." And then he finished the second glass. There was a sort of understanding on the part of his wife that such interjections as these referred to Hubbles and Grease, and indicated a painfully advanced state of drink. There was one hope; the double heat, that of the fire and of the whisky, might make him sleep; and if so, he would be safe for two or three hours.

"I'm blessed if I do, and that's all," said Moulder, grasping the whisky-bottle for the third time. His wife sat behind him very anxious, but not daring to interfere. "It's going over the table, M.," she then said.

"D—— the table!" he answered; and then his head fell forward on his breast, and he was fast asleep with the bottle in his hand.

"Put your hand to it, John," said Mrs. Moulder in a whisper. But John hesitated. The lion might rouse himself if his prey were touched.

"He'll let it go easy if you put your hand to it. He's safe enough now. There. If we could only get him back from the fire a little, or his face'll be burnt off of him."

"But you wouldn't move him?"

"Well, yes; we'll try. I've done it before, and he's never stirred. Come here, just behind. The casters is

good, I know. Laws! aint he heavy?" And then they slowly dragged him back. He grunted out some half-pronounced threat as they moved him; but he did not stir, and his wife knew that she was again mistress of the room for the next two hours. It was true that he snored horribly, but then she was used to that.

"You won't let her come up, will you?" said John.

"Why not? She knows what men is as well as I do. Smiley wasn't that way often, I believe; but he was awful when he was. He wouldn't sleep it off, quite innocent, like that; but would break everything about the place, and then cry like a child after it. Now Moulder's got none of that about him. The worst of it is, how am I ever to get him into bed when he wakes?"

While the anticipation of this great trouble was still on her mind, the ring at the bell was heard, and John Kenneby went down to the outer door that he might pay to Mrs. Smiley the attention of waiting upon her up stairs. And up stairs she came, bristling with silk—the identical Irish tabinet, perhaps, which had never been turned—and conscious of the business which had brought her.

"What—Moulder's asleep, is he?" she said as she entered the room. "I suppose that's as good as a pair of gloves, any way."

"He ain't just very well," said Mrs. Moulder, winking at her friend; "he's tired after a long journey."

"Oh—h! ah—h!" said Mrs. Smiley, looking down upon the sleeping beauty, and understanding everything at a glance. "It's uncommon bad for him, you know, because he's so given to flesh."

"It's as much fatigue as anything," said the wife.

"Yes, I dare say;" and Mrs. Smiley shook her

head. "If he fatigues himself so much as that often he'll soon be off the hooks."

Much was undoubtedly to be borne from two hundred a year in a brick-field, especially when that two hundred a year was coming so very near home; but there is an amount of impertinent familiarity which must be put down even in two hundred a year. "I've known worse cases than him, my dear; and that ended worse."

"Oh, I dare say. But you're mistook if you mean Smiley. It was 'sepilus as took him off, as everybody knows."

"Well, my dear, I'm sure I'm not going to say anything against that. And now, John, do help her off with her bonnet and shawl, while I get the tea-things."

Mrs. Smiley was a firm set, healthy-looking woman of—about forty. She had large, dark, glassy eyes, which were bright without sparkling. Her cheeks were very red, having a fixed settled colour that never altered with circumstances. Her black wiry hair was ended in short crisp curls, which sat close to her head. It almost collected like a wig, but the hair was in truth her own. Her mouth was small, and her lips thin, and they gave to her face a look of sharpness that was not quite agreeable. Nevertheless she was not a bad-looking woman, and with such advantages as two hundred a year and the wardrobe which Mrs. Moulder had described, was no doubt entitled to look for a second husband.

"Well, Mr. Kenneby, and how do you find yourself this cold weather? Dear, how he do snore; don't he?"

"Yes," said Kenneby, very thoughtfully, "he does rather." He was thinking of Miriam Usbech as she was twenty years ago, and of Mrs. Smiley as she appeared at present. Not that he felt inclined to

grumble at the lot prepared for him, but that he would like to take a few more years to think about it.

And then they sat down to tea. The lovely chops which Moulder had despised, and the ham in beautiful cut which had failed to tempt him, now met with due appreciation. Mrs. Smiley, though she had never been known to take a drop too much, did like to have things comfortable; and on this occasion she made an excellent meal, with a large pocket-handkerchief of Moulder's—brought in for the occasion—stretched across the broad expanse of the Irish tabinet. "We sha'n't wake him, shall we?" said she, as she took her last bit of muffin.

"Not till he wakes natural, of hisself," said Mrs. Moulder. "When he's worked it off, he'll rouse himself, and I shall have to get him to bed."

"He'll be a bit patchy then, won't he?"

"Well, just for a while of course he will," said Mrs. Moulder. "But there's worse than him. To-morrow morning, maybe, he'll be just as sweet as sweet. It don't hang about him, sullen like. That's what I hate, when it hangs about 'em." Then the tea-things were taken away, Mrs. Smiley in her familiarity assisting in the removal, and—in spite of the example now before them—some more sugar and some more spirits, and some more hot water were put upon the table. "Well, I don't mind just the least taste in life, Mrs. Moulder, as we're quite between friends; and I'm sure you'll want it to-night to keep yourself up." Mrs. Moulder would have answered these last words with some severity had she not felt that good humour now might be of great value to her brother.

"Well, John, and what is it you've got to say to her?" said Mrs. Moulder, as she put down her empty

glass. Between friends who understood each other so well, and at their time of life, what was the use of ceremony?

"La, Mrs. Moulder, what should he have got to say? Nothing, I'm sure as I'd think of listening to."

"You try her, John."

"Not but what I've the greatest respect in life for Mr. Kenneby, and always did have. If you must have anything to do with men, I've always said, recommend me to them as is quiet and steady, and hasn't got too much of the gab;—a quiet man is the man for me any day."

"Well, John?" said Mrs. Moulder.

"Now, Mrs. Moulder, can't you keep yourself to yourself, and we shall do very well. Laws, how he do snore! When his head goes bobbing that way I do so fear he'll have a fit."

"No he won't; he's coming to, all right. Well, John?"

"I'm sure I shall be very happy," said John, "if she likes it. She says she respects me, and I'm sure I've a great respect for her. I always had—even when Mr. Smiley was alive."

"It's very good for you to say so," said she; not speaking however as though she were quite satisfied. What was the use of his remembering Smiley just at present?

"Enough's enough between friends any day," said Mrs. Moulder. "So give her your hand, John."

"I think it'll be right to say one thing first," said Kenneby, with a solemn and deliberate tone.

"And what's that?" said Mrs. Smiley, eagerly.

"In such a matter as this," continued Kenneby, "where the hearts are concerned——"

"You didn't say anything about hearts yet," said Mrs. Smiley, with some measure of approbation in her voice.

"Didn't I?" said Kenneby. "Then it was an omission on my part, and I beg leave to apologise. But what I was going to say is this: when the hearts are concerned, everything should be honest and above-board."

"Oh of course," said Mrs. Moulder; "and I'm sure she don't suspect nothing else."

"You'd better let him go on," said Mrs. Smiley.

"My heart has not been free from woman's lovely image."

"And isn't free now, is it John?" said Mrs. Moulder.

"I've had my object, and though she's been another's, still I've kept her image on my heart."

"But it ain't there any longer, John? He's speaking of twenty years ago, Mrs. Smiley."

"It's quite beautiful to hear him," said Mrs. Smiley. "Go on, Mr. Kenneby."

"The years are gone by as though they was nothing, and still I've had her image on my heart. I've seen her to-day."

"Her gentleman's still alive, ain't he?" asked Mrs. Smiley.

"And likely to live," said Mrs. Moulder.

"I've seen her to-day," Kenneby continued; "and now the Adriatic's free to wed another."

Neither of the ladies present exactly understood the force of the quotation; but as it contained an appropriate reference to marriage, and apparently to a second marriage, it was taken by both of them in good part. He was considered to have made his offer, and Mrs. Smiley thereupon formally accepted him. "He's

spoke quite handsome, I'm sure," said Mrs. Smiley to his sister; "and I don't know that any woman has a right to expect more. As to the brick-fields——." And then there was a slight reference to business, with which it will not be necessary that the readers of this story should embarrass themselves.

Soon after that Mr. Kenneby saw Mrs. Smiley home in a cab, and poor Mrs. Moulder sat by her lord till he roused himself from his sleep. Let us hope that her troubles with him were as little vexatious as possible; and console ourselves with the reflection that at twelve o'clock the next morning, after the second bottle of soda and brandy he was "as sweet as sweet."

CHAPTER XVII

SHOWING HOW LADY MASON COULD BE VERY NOBLE

LADY MASON returned to The Cleeve after her visit to Mr. Furnival's chambers, and nobody asked her why she had been to London or whom she had seen. Nothing could be more gracious than the deference which was shown to her, and the perfect freedom of action which was accorded to her. On that very day Lady Staveley had called at The Cleeve, explaining to Sir Peregrine and Mrs. Orme that her visit was made expressly to Lady Mason. "I should have called at Orley Farm, of course," said Lady Staveley, "only that I hear that Lady Mason is likely to prolong her visit with you. I must trust to you, Mrs. Orme, to make all that understood." Sir Peregrine took upon himself to say that it all should be understood, and then drawing Lady Staveley aside, told her of his own intended marriage. "I cannot but be aware," he said, "that I have no business to trouble you with an affair that is so exclusively our own; but I have a wish, which perhaps you may understand, that there should be no secret about it. I think it better, for her sake, that it should be known. If the connection can be of any service to her, she should reap that benefit now, when some people are treating her name with a barbarity which I believe to be almost unparalleled in this country." In answer to this Lady Staveley was of course obliged to congratulate him, and she did so with the best grace in

her power, but it was too early to say much that was cordial, and as she drove back with Mrs. Arbuthnot to Noningsby the words which were said between them as to Lady Mason were not so kindly meant towards that lady as their remarks on their journey to The Cleeve.

Lady Staveley had hoped,—though she had hardly expressed her hope even to herself, and certainly had not spoken of it to any one else,—that she might have been able to say a word or two to Mrs. Orme about young Peregrine, a word or two that would have shown her own good feeling towards the young man,—her own regard, and almost affection for him, even though this might have been done without any mention of Madeline's name. She might have learned in this way whether young Orme had made known at home what had been his hopes and what his disappointments, and might have formed some opinion whether or no he would renew his suit. She would not have been the first to mention her daughter's name; but if Mrs. Orme should speak of it, then the subject would be free for her, and she could let it be known that the heir of The Cleeve should at any rate have her sanction and good will. What happiness could be so great for her as that of having a daughter so settled, within eight miles of her? And then it was not only that a marriage between her daughter and Peregrine Orme would be an event so fortunate, but also that those feelings with reference to Felix Graham were so unfortunate! That young heart, she thought, could not as yet be heavy laden, and it might be possible that the whole affair should be made to run in the proper course,—if only it could be done at once. But now, that tale which Sir Peregrine had told her respecting himself and Lady Mason had made it quite impossible that any-

thing should be said on the other subject. And then again, if it was decreed that the Noningsby family and the family of The Cleeve should be connected, would not such a marriage as this between the baronet and Lady Mason be very injurious? So that Lady Staveley was not quite happy as she returned to her own house.

Lady Staveley's message, however, for Lady Mason was given with all its full force Sir Peregrine had felt grateful for what had been done, and Mrs. Orme, in talking of it, made quite the most of it. Civility from the Staveleys to the Ormes would not, in the ordinary course of things, be accounted of any special value. The two families might, and naturally would, know each other on intimate terms. But the Ormes would as a matter of course stand the highest in general estimation. Now, however, the Ormes had to bear up Lady Mason with them. Sir Peregrine had so willed it, and Mrs. Orme had not for a moment thought of contesting the wish of one whose wishes she had never contested. No words were spoken on the subject; but still with both of them there was a feeling that Lady Staveley's countenance and open friendship would be of value. When it had come to this with Sir Peregrine Orme, he was already disgraced in his own estimation,—already disgraced, although he declared to himself a thousand times that he was only doing his duty as a gentleman.

On that evening Lady Mason said no word of her new purpose. She had pledged herself both to Peregrine Orme and to Mr. Furnival. To both she had made a distinct promise that she would break off her engagement, and she knew well that the deed should be done at once. But how was she to do it? With what

words was she to tell him that she had changed her mind and would not take the hand that he had offered to her? She feared to be a moment alone with Peregrine lest he should tax her with the non-fulfilment of her promise. But in truth Peregrine at the present moment was thinking more of another matter. It had almost come home to him that his grandfather's marriage might facilitate his own; and though he still was far from reconciling himself to the connection with Lady Mason, he was almost disposed to put up with it.

On the following day, at about noon, a chariot with a pair of post-horses was brought up to the door of The Cleeve at a very fast pace, and the two ladies soon afterwards learned that Lord Alston was closeted with Sir Peregrine. Lord Alston was one of Sir Peregrine's oldest friends. He was a man senior both in age and standing to the baronet; and, moreover, he was a friend who came but seldom to The Cleeve, although his friendship was close and intimate. Nothing was said between Mrs. Orme and Lady Mason, but each dreaded that Lord Alston had come to remonstrate about the marriage. And so in truth he had. The two old men were together for about an hour, and then Lord Alston took his departure without asking for or seeing any other one of the family. Lord Alston had remonstrated about the marriage, using at last very strong language to dissuade the baronet from a step which he thought so unfortunate; but he had remonstrated altogether in vain. Every word that he had used was not only fruitless, but injurious; for Sir Peregrine was a man whom it was very difficult to rescue by opposition, though no man might be more easily led by assumed acquiescence.

"Orme, my dear fellow," said his lordship, towards the end of the interview, "it is my duty, as an old friend, to tell you this."

"Then, Lord Alston, you have done your duty."

"Not while a hope remains that I may prevent this marriage."

"There is ground for no such hope on your part; and permit me to say that the expression of such a hope to me is greatly wanting in courtesy."

"You and I," continued Lord Alston, without apparent attention to the last words which Sir Peregrine had spoken, "have nearly come to the end of our tether here. Our careers have been run; and I think I may say as regards both, but I may certainly say as regards you, that they have been so run that we have not disgraced those who preceded us. Our dearest hopes should be that our names may never be held as a reproach by those who come after us."

"With God's blessing I will do nothing to disgrace my family."

"But, Orme, you and I cannot act as may those whose names in the world are altogether unnoticed. I know that you are doing this from a feeling of charity to that lady."

"I am doing it, Lord Alston, because it so pleases me."

"But your first charity is due to your grandson. Suppose that he was making an offer of his hand to the daughter of some nobleman,—as he is so well entitled to do,—how would it affect his hopes if it were known that you at the time had married a lady whose misfortune made it necessary that she should stand at the bar in a criminal court?"

"Lord Alston," said Sir Peregrine, rising from his

chair, "I trust that my grandson may never rest his hopes on any woman whose heart could be hardened against him by such a thought as that."

"But what if she should be guilty?" said Lord Alston.

"Permit me to say," said Sir Peregrine, still standing, and standing now bolt upright, as though his years did not weigh on him a feather, "that this conversation has gone far enough. There are some surmises to which I cannot listen, even from Lord Alston."

Then his lordship shrugged his shoulders, declared that in speaking as he had spoken he had endeavoured to do a friendly duty by an old friend,—certainly the oldest, and almost the dearest friend he had,—and so he took his leave. The wheels of the chariot were heard grating over the gravel, as he was carried away from the door at a gallop, and the two ladies looked into each other's faces, saying nothing. Sir Peregrine was not seen from that time till dinner; but when he did come into the drawing-room his manner to Lady Mason was, if possible, more gracious and more affectionate than ever.

"So Lord Alston was here to-day," Peregrine said to his mother that night before he went to bed.

"Yes, he was here."

"It was about this marriage, mother, as sure as I am standing here."

"I don't think Lord Alston would interfere about that, Perry."

"Wouldn't he? He would interfere about anything he did not like; that is, as far as the pluck of it goes. Of course he can't like it. Who can?"

"Perry, your grandfather likes it; and surely he has a right to please himself."

"I don't know about that. You might say the same thing if he wanted to kill all the foxes about the place, or do any other outlandish thing. Of course he might kill them, as far as the law goes, but where would he be afterwards? She hasn't said anything to him, has she?"

"I think not."

"Nor to you?"

"No; she has not spoken to me; not about that."

"She promised me positively that she would break it off."

"You must not be hard on her, Perry."

Just as these words were spoken, there came a low knock at Mrs. Orme's dressing-room door. This room, in which Mrs. Orme was wont to sit for an hour or so every night before she went to bed, was the scene of all the meetings of affection which took place between the mother and the son. It was a pretty little apartment, opening from Mrs. Orme's bed-room, which had at one time been the exclusive property of Peregrine's father. But by degrees it had altogether assumed feminine attributes; had been furnished with soft chairs, a sofa, and a lady's table; and though called by the name of Mrs. Orme's dressing-room, was in fact a separate sitting-room devoted to her exclusive use. Sir Peregrine would not for worlds have entered it without sending up his name beforehand, and this he did on only very rare occasions. But Lady Mason had of late been admitted here, and Mrs. Orme now knew that it was her knock.

"Open the door, Perry," she said; "it is Lady Mason." He did open the door and Lady Mason entered.

"Oh, Mr. Orme I did not know that you were here."

"I am just off. Good-night, mother."

"But I am disturbing you."

"No, we had done;" and he stooped down and kissed his mother "Good-night, Lady Mason. Hadn't I better put some coals on for you, or the fire will be out?" He did put on the coals, and then he went his way.

Lady Mason while he was doing this had sat down on the sofa, close to Mrs. Orme; but when the door was closed Mrs. Orme was the first to speak. "Well, dear," she said, putting her hand caressingly on the other's arm. I am inclined to think that had there been no one whom Mrs. Orme was bound to consult but herself, she would have wished that this marriage should have gone on. To her it would have been altogether pleasant to have had Lady Mason ever with her in the house; and she had none of those fears as to future family retrospections respecting which Lord Alston had spoken with so much knowledge of the world. As it was, her manner was so caressing and affectionate to her guest, that she did much more to promote Sir Peregrine's wishes than to oppose them. "Well, dear," she said, with her sweetest smile.

"I am so sorry that I have driven your son away."

"He was going. Besides, it would make no matter; he would stay here all night sometimes, if I didn't drive him away myself. He comes here and writes his letters at the most unconscionable hours, and uses up all my note-paper in telling some horsekeeper what is to be done with his mare."

"Ah, how happy you must be to have him!"

"Well, I suppose I am," she said, as a tear came into her eyes. "We are so hard to please. I am all anxiety now that he should be married; and if he were

married, then I suppose I should grumble because I did not see so much of him. He would be more settled if he would marry, I think. For myself I approve of early marriages for young men," and then she thought of her own husband whom she had loved so well and lost so soon. And so they sat silent for a while, each thinking of her own lot in life.

"But I must not keep you up all night," said Lady Mason.

"Oh, I do so like you to be here," said the other. Then again she took hold of her arm, and the two women kissed each other.

"But, Edith," said the other, "I came in here to-night with a purpose. I have something that I wish to say to you. Can you listen to me?"

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Orme; "surely."

"Has your son been talking to you about—about what was said between him and me the other day? I am sure he has, for I know he tells you everything,—as he ought to do."

"Yes, he did speak to me," said Mrs. Orme, almost trembling with anxiety.

"I am so glad, for now it will be easier for me to tell you. And since that I have seen Mr. Furnival, and he says the same. I tell you because you are so good and so loving to me. I will keep nothing from you; but you must not tell Sir Peregrine that I talked to Mr. Furnival about this."

Mrs. Orme gave the required promise, hardly thinking at the moment whether or no she would be guilty of any treason against Sir Peregrine in doing so.

"I think I should have said nothing to him, though he is so very old a friend, had not Mr. Orme——"

"You mean Peregrine?"

"Yes; had not he been so—so earnest about it. He told me that if I married Sir Peregrine I should be doing a cruel injury to him—to his grandfather."

"He should not have said that."

"Yes, Edith,—if he thinks it. He told me that I should be turning all his friends against him. So I promised him that I would speak to Sir Peregrine, and break it off if it be possible."

"He told me that."

"And then I spoke to Mr. Furnival, and he told me that I should be blamed by all the world if I were to marry him. I cannot tell you all he said, but he said this: that if—if——"

"If what, dear?"

"If in the court they should say——"

"Say what?"

"Say that I did this thing,—then Sir Peregrine would be crushed, and would die with a broken heart."

"But they cannot say that;—it is impossible. You do not think it possible that they can do so?" And then again she took hold of Lady Mason's arm, and looked up anxiously into her face. She looked up anxiously, not suspecting anything, not for a moment presuming it possible that such a verdict could be justly given, but in order that she might see how far the fear of a fate so horrible was operating on her friend. Lady Mason's face was pale and woe-worn, but not more so than was now customary with her.

"One cannot say what may be possible," she answered slowly. "I suppose they would not go on with it if they did not think they had some chance of success."

"You mean as to the property?"

"Yes; as to the property."

"But why should they not try that, if they must try it, without dragging you there?"

"Ah, I do not understand; or at least I cannot explain it. Mr. Furnival says that it must be so; and therefore I shall tell Sir Peregrine to-morrow that all this must be given up;" and then they sat together silently, holding each other by the hand.

"Good-night, Edith," Lady Mason said at last, getting up from her seat.

"Good-night, dearest."

"You will let me be your friend still, will you not?" said Lady Mason.

"My friend! Oh yes; always my friend. Why should this interfere between you and me?"

"But he will be very angry—at least I fear that he will. Not that—not that he will have anything to regret. But the very strength of his generosity and nobleness will make him angry. He will be indignant because I do not let him make this sacrifice for me. And then—and then—I fear I must leave this house."

"Oh no, not that; I will speak to him. He will do anything for me."

"It will be better perhaps that I should go. People will think that I am estranged from Lucius. But if I go, you will come to me? He will let you do that; will he not?"

And then there were warm, close promises given, and embraces interchanged. The women did love each other with a hearty, true love, and each longed that they might be left together. And yet how different they were, and how different had been their lives!

The prominent thought in Lady Mason's mind as she returned to her own room was this:—that Mrs. Orme had said no word to dissuade her from the line of con-

duct which she had proposed to herself. Mrs. Orme had never spoken against the marriage as Peregrine had spoken, and Mr. Furnival. Her heart had not been stern enough to allow her to do that. But was it not clear that her opinion was the same as theirs? Lady Mason acknowledged to herself that it was clear, and acknowledged to herself also that no one was in favour of the marriage. "I will do it immediately after breakfast," she said to herself. And then she sat down,—and sat through the half the night thinking of it.

Mrs. Orme, when she was left alone, almost rebuked herself in that she had said no word of counsel against the undertaking which Lady Mason proposed for herself. For Mr. Furnival and his opinion she did not care much. Indeed, she would have been angry with Lady Mason for speaking to Mr. Furnival on the subject, were it not that her pity was too deep to admit of any anger. That the truth must be established at the trial Mrs. Orme felt all but confident. When alone she would feel quite sure on this point, though a doubt would always creep in on her when Lady Mason was with her. But now, as she sat alone, she could not realise the idea that the fear of a verdict against her friend should offer any valid reason against the marriage. The valid reasons, if there were such, must be looked for elsewhere. And were these other reasons so strong in their validity? Sir Peregrine desired the marriage; and so did Lady Mason herself, as regarded her own individual wishes. Mrs. Orme was sure that this was so. And then for her own self, she—Sir Peregrine's daughter-in-law, the only lady concerned in the matter—she also would have liked it. But her son disliked it, and she had yielded so far to the wishes of her son. Well, was it not right that with her those wishes

should be all but paramount? And thus she endeavoured to satisfy her conscience as she retired to rest.

On the following morning the four assembled at breakfast. Lady Mason hardly spoke at all to any one. Mrs. Orme, who knew what was about to take place, was almost as silent; but Sir Peregrine had almost more to say than usual to his grandson. He was in good spirits, having firmly made up his mind on a certain point; and he showed this by telling Peregrine that he would ride with him immediately after breakfast. "What has made you so slack about your hunting during the last two or three days?" he asked.

"I shall hunt to-morrow," said Peregrine.

"Then you can afford time to ride with me through the woods after breakfast." And so it would have been arranged had not Lady Mason immediately said that she hoped to be able to say a few words to Sir Peregrine in the library after breakfast. "*Place aux dames*," said he. "Peregrine, the horses can wait." And so the matter was arranged while they were still sitting over their toast.

Peregrine, as this was said, had looked at his mother, but she had not ventured to take her eyes for a moment from the teapot. Then he had looked at Lady Mason, and saw that she was, as it were, going through a fashion of eating her breakfast. In order to break the absolute silence of the room he muttered something about the weather, and then his grandfather, with the same object, answered him. After that no words were spoken till Sir Peregrine, rising from his chair, declared that he was ready.

He got up and opened the door for his guest, and then hurrying across the hall, opened the library door

for her also, holding it till she had passed in. Then he took her left hand in his, and passing his right arm round her waist, asked her if anything disturbed her.

"Oh yes," she said, "yes; there is much that disturbs me. I have done very wrong."

"How done wrong, Mary?" She could not recollect that he had called her Mary before, and the sound she thought was very sweet;—was very sweet, although she was over forty, and he over seventy years of age.

"I have done very wrong, and I have now come here that I may undo it. Dear Sir Peregrine, you must not be angry with me."

"I do not think that I shall be angry with you; but what is it, dearest?"

But she did not know how to find words to declare her purpose. It was comparatively an easy task to tell Mrs. Orme that she had made up her mind not to marry Sir Peregrine, but it was by no means easy to tell the baronet himself. And now she stood there leaning over the fireplace, with his arm round her waist,—as it behoved her to stand no longer, seeing the resolution to which she had come. But still she did not speak.

"Well, Mary, what is it? I know there is something on your mind or you would not have summoned me in here. Is it about the trial? Have you seen Mr. Funnival again?"

"No; it is not about the trial," she said, avoiding the other question.

"What is it, then?"

"Sir Peregrine, it is impossible that we should be married." And thus she brought forth her tidings, as it were at a gasp, speaking at the moment with a voice that was almost indicative of anger.

"And why not?" said he, releasing her from his arm and looking at her.

"It cannot be," she said.

"And why not, Lady Mason?"

"It cannot be," she said again, speaking with more emphasis, and with a stronger tone.

"And is that all that you intend to tell me? Have I done anything that has offended you?"

"Offended me! No. I do not think that would be possible. The offence is on the other side——"

"Then, my dear——"

"But listen to me now. It cannot be. I know that it is wrong. Everything tells me that such a marriage on your part would be a sacrifice,—a terrible sacrifice. You would be throwing away your great rank——"

"No," shouted Sir Peregrine; "not though I married a kitchen-maid,—instead of a lady who in social life is my equal."

"Ah, no; I should not have said rank. You cannot lose that;—but your station in the world, the respect of all around you, the—the—the——"

"Who has been telling you all this?"

"I have wanted no one to tell me. Thinking of it has told me it all. My own heart which is full of gratitude and love for you has told me."

"You have not seen Lord Alston?"

"Lord Alston! oh, no."

"Has Peregrine been speaking to you?"

"Peregrine!"

"Yes; Peregrine; my grandson?"

"He has spoken to me."

"Telling you to say this to me. Then he is an ungrateful boy;—a very ungrateful boy. I would have

done anything to guard him from wrong in this matter."

"Ah; now I see the evil that I have done. Why did I ever come into the house to make quarrels between you?"

"There shall be no quarrel. I will forgive him even that if you will be guided by me. And, dearest Mary, you must be guided by me now. This matter has gone too far for you to go back—unless, indeed, you will say that personally you have an aversion to the marriage."

"Oh, no; no; it is not that," she said eagerly. She could not help saying it with eagerness. She could not inflict the wound on his feelings which her silence would then have given.

"Under those circumstances, I have a right to say that the marriage must go on."

"No; no."

"But I say it must. Sit down, Mary." And she did sit down, while he stood leaning over her and thus spoke. "You speak of sacrificing me. I am an old man with not many more years before me. If I did sacrifice what little is left to me of life with the object of befriending one whom I really love, there would be no more in it than what a man might do, and still feel that the balance was on the right side. But here there will be no sacrifice. My life will be happier, and so will Edith's. And so indeed will that boy's, if he did but know it. For the world's talk, which will last some month or two, I care nothing. This I will confess, that if I were prompted to this only by my own inclination, only by love for you——" and as he spoke he held out his hand to her, and she could not refuse him hers—"in such a case I should doubt and hesitate and

probably keep aloof from such a step. But it is not so. In doing this I shall gratify my own heart, and also serve you in your great troubles. Believe me, I have thought of that."

"I know you have, Sir Peregrine,—and therefore it cannot be."

"But therefore it shall be. The world knows it now; and were we to be separated after what has past, the world would say that I—I had thought you guilty of this crime."

"I must bear all that." And now she stood before him, not looking him in the face, but with her face turned down towards the ground, and speaking hardly above her breath.

"By Heavens, no; not whilst I can stand by your side. Not whilst I have strength left to support you and thrust the lie down the throat of such a wretch as Joseph Mason. No, Mary, go back to Edith and tell her that you have tried it, but that there is no escape for you." And then he smiled at her. His smile at times could be very pleasant!

But she did not smile as she answered him. "Sir Peregrine," she said; and she endeavoured to raise her face to his but failed.

"Well, my love."

"Sir Peregrine, I am guilty."

"Guilty! Guilty of what?" he said, startled rather than instructed by her words.

"Guilty of all this with which they charge me." And then she threw herself at his feet, and wound her arms round his knees.

CHAPTER XVIII

SHOWING HOW MRS. ORME COULD BE VERY WEAK-MINDED

I VENTURE to think, I may almost say to hope, that Lady Mason's confession at the end of the last chapter will not have taken anybody by surprise. If such surprise be felt I must have told my tale badly. I do not like such revulsions of feeling with regard to my characters as surprises of this nature must generate. That Lady Mason had committed the terrible deed for which she was about to be tried, that Mr. Furnival's suspicion of her guilt was only too well founded, that Mr. Dockwrath with his wicked ingenuity had discovered no more than the truth, will, in its open revelation, have caused no surprise to the reader;—but it did cause terrible surprise to Sir Peregrine Orme.

And now we must go back a little and endeavour to explain how it was that Lady Mason had made this avowal of her guilt. That she had not intended to do so when she entered Sir Peregrine's library is very certain. Had such been her purpose she would not have asked Mrs. Orme to visit her at Orley Farm. Had such a course of events been in her mind she would not have spoken of her departure from The Cleeve as doubtful. No. She had intended still to keep her terrible secret to herself; still to have leaned upon Sir Peregrine's arm as on the arm of a trusting friend. But he had overcome her by his generosity;

and in her fixed resolve that he should not be dragged down into this abyss of misery the sudden determination to tell the truth at least to him had come upon her. She did tell him all; and then as soon as the words were out of her mouth, the strength which had enabled her to do so deserted her, and she fell at his feet overcome by weakness of body as well as spirit.

But the words which she spoke did not at first convey to his mind their full meaning. Though she had twice repeated the assertion that she was guilty, the fact of her guilt did not come home to his understanding as a thing that he could credit. There was something, he doubted not, to surprise and harass him,—something which when revealed and made clear might, or might not, affect his purpose of marrying,—something which it behoved this woman to tell before she could honestly become his wife, something which was destined to give his heart a blow. But he was very far as yet from understanding the whole truth. Let us think of those we love best, and ask ourselves how much it would take to convince us of their guilt in such a matter. That thrusting of the lie down the throat of Joseph Mason had become to him so earnest a duty, that the task of believing the lie to be on the other side was no easy one. The blow which he had to suffer was a cruel blow. Lady Mason, however, was merciful, for she might have enhanced the cruelty tenfold.

He stood there wondering and bewildered for some minutes of time, while she, with her face hidden, still clung round his knees. "What is it?" at last he said. "I do not understand." But she had no answer to make to him. Her great resolve had been quickly made and quickly carried out, but now the reaction left her powerless. He stooped down to raise her; but when

he moved she fell prone upon the ground; he could hear her sobs as though her bosom would burst with them.

And then by degrees the meaning of her words began to break upon him. "I am guilty of all this with which they charge me." Could that be possible? Could it be that she had forged that will; that with base, premeditated contrivance she had stolen that property; stolen it and kept it from that day to this;—through all these long years? And then he thought of her pure life, of her womanly, dignified repose, of her devotion to her son,—such devotion indeed!—of her sweet pale face and soft voice! He thought of all this, and of his own love and friendship for her,—of Edith's love for her! He thought of it all, and he could not believe that she was guilty. There was some other fault, some much lesser fault than that, with which she charged herself. But there she lay at his feet, and it was necessary that he should do something towards lifting her to a seat.

He stooped and took her by the hand, but his feeble strength was not sufficient to raise her. "Lady Mason," he said, "speak to me. I do not understand you. Will you not let me seat you on the sofa?"

But she, at least, had realised the full force of the revelation she had made, and lay there covered with shame, broken-hearted, and unable to raise her eyes from the ground. With what inward struggles she had played her part during the last few months, no one might ever know! But those struggles had been kept to herself. The world, her world, that world for which she had cared, in which she had lived, had treated her with honour and respect, and had looked upon her as an ill-used innocent woman. But now all that would

be over. Every one now must know what she was. And then, as she lay there, that thought came to her. Must every one know it? Was there no longer any hope for her? Must Lucius be told? She could bear all the rest, if only he might be ignorant of his mother's disgrace;—he, for whom all had been done! But no. He, and every one must know it. Oh! if the beneficent Spirit that sees all and pities all would but take her that moment from the world!

When Sir Peregrine asked her whether he should seat her on the sofa, she slowly picked herself up, and with her head still crouching towards the ground, placed herself where she had before been sitting. He had been afraid that she would have fainted, but she was not one of those women whose nature easily admits of such relief as that. Though she was always pale in colour and frail looking, there was within her a great power of self-sustenance. She was a woman who with a good cause might have dared anything. With the worst cause that a woman could well have, she had dared and endured very much. She did not faint, nor gasp as though she were choking, nor become hysterical in her agony; but she lay there, huddled up in the corner of the sofa, with her face hidden, and all those feminine graces forgotten which had long stood her in truth so royally. The inner, true, living woman was there at last,—that and nothing else.

But he,—what was he to do? It went against his heart to harass her at that moment; but then it was essential that he should know the truth. The truth, or a suspicion of the truth was now breaking upon him; and if that suspicion should be confirmed, what was he to do? It was at any rate necessary that everything should be put beyond a doubt.

"Lady Mason," he said, "if you are able to speak to me——"

"Yes," she said, gradually straightening herself, and raising her head though she did not look at him.

"Yes, I am able." But there was something terrible in the sound of her voice. It was such a sound of agony that he felt himself unable to persist.

"If you wish it I will leave you, and come back,—say in an hour."

"No, no; do not leave me." And her whole body was shaken with a tremor, as though of an ague fit. "Do not go away, and I will tell you everything. I did it."

"Did what?"

"I—forged the will. I did it all.—I am guilty."

There was the whole truth now, declared openly and in the most simple words, and there was no longer any possibility that he should doubt. It was very terrible,—a terrible tragedy. But to him at this present moment the part most frightful was his and her present position. What should he do for her? How should he counsel her? In what way so act that he might best assist her without compromising that high sense of right and wrong which in him was a second nature. He felt at the moment that he would still give his last shilling to rescue her,—only that there was the property! Let the Heavens fall, justice must be done there. Even a wretch such as Joseph Mason must have that which was clearly his own.

As she spoke those last words, she had risen from the sofa, and was now standing before him resting with her hands upon the table, like a prisoner in the dock.

"What!" he said; "with your own hands?"

"Yes; with my own hands. When he would not do

justice to my baby, when he talked of that other being the head of his house, I did it, with my own hands,—during the night.”

“And you wrote the names,—yourself?”

“Yes; I wrote them all.” And then there was again silence in the room; but she still stood, leaning on the table, waiting for him to speak her doom.

He turned away from the spot in which he had confronted her and walked to the window. What was he to do? How was he to help her? And how was he to be rid of her? How was he to save his daughter from further contact with a woman such as this? And how was he to bid his daughter behave to this woman as one woman should behave to another in her misery? Then too he had learned to love her himself,—had yearned to call her his own; and though this in truth was a minor sorrow, it was one which at the moment added bitterness to the others. But there she stood, still waiting her doom, and it was necessary that that doom should be spoken by him.

“If this can really be true——”

“It is true. You do not think that a woman would falsely tell such a tale as that against herself!”

“Then I fear—that this must be over between you and me.”

There was a relief to her, a sort of relief, in those words. The doom as so far spoken was so much a matter of course that it conveyed no penalty. Her story had been told in order that that result might be attained with certainty. There was almost a tone of scorn in her voice as she said, “Oh yes; all that must be over.”

“And what next would you have me do?” he asked.

"I have nothing to request," she said. "If you must tell it to all the world, do so."

"Tell it; no. It will not be my business to be an informer."

"But you must tell it. There is Mrs. Orme."

"Yes; to Edith!"

"And I must leave the house. Oh, where shall I go when he knows it? And where will he go?" Wretched miserable woman, but yet so worthy of pity! What a terrible retribution for that night's work was now coming on her!

He again walked to the window to think how he might answer these questions. Must he tell his daughter? Must he banish this criminal at once from his house? Every one now had been told of his intended marriage; every one had been told through Lord Alston, Mr. Furnival, and such as they. That at any rate must now be untold. And would it be possible that she should remain there, living with them at The Cleeve, while all this was being done? In truth he did not know how to speak. He had not hardness of heart to pronounce her doom.

"Of course I shall leave the house," she said, with something almost of pride in her voice. "If there be no place open to me but a gaol I will do that. Perhaps I had better go now and get my things removed at once. Say a word of love for me to her;—a word of respectful love." And she moved as though she were going to the door.

But he would not permit her to leave him thus. He could not let the poor, crushed, broken creature wander forth in her agony to bruise herself at every turn, and to be alone in her despair. She was still the woman whom he had loved; and, over and beyond that, was she not

the woman who had saved him from a terrible downfall by rushing herself into utter ruin for his sake? He must take some steps in her behalf—if he could only resolve what those steps should be. She was moving to the door, but stopping her, he took her by the hand. “You did it,” he said, “and he, your husband, knew nothing of it?” The fact itself was so wonderful, that he had hardly as yet made even that all his own.

“I did it, and he knew nothing of it. I will go now, Sir Peregrine; I am strong enough.”

“But where will you go?”

“Ah me, where shall I go?” And she put the hand which was at liberty up to her temple, brushing back her hair as though she might thus collect her thoughts. “Where shall I go? But he does not know it yet. I will go now to Orley Farm. When must he be told? Tell me that. When must he know it?”

“No, Lady Mason; you cannot go there to-day. It’s very hard to say what you had better do.”

“Very hard,” she echoed, shaking her head.

“But you must remain here at present;—at The Cleeve I mean; at any rate for to-day. I will think about it. I will endeavour to think what may be the best.”

“But—we cannot meet now. She and I;—Mrs. Orme?” And then again he was silent; for in truth the difficulties were too many for him. Might it not be best that she should counterfeit illness and be confined to her own room? But then he was averse to recommend any counterfeit; and if Mrs. Orme did not go to her in her assumed illness, the counterfeit would utterly fail of effect in the household. And then, should he tell Mrs. Orme? The weight of these tid-

ings would be too much for him, if he did not share them with some one. So he made up his mind that he must tell them to her—though to no other one.

“I must tell her,” he said.

“Oh yes,” she replied; and he felt her hand tremble in his, and dropped it. He had forgotten that he thus held her as all these thoughts pressed upon his brain.

“I will tell it to her, but to no one else. If I might advise you, I would say that it will be well for you now to take some rest. You are agitated, and——”

“Agitated! yes. But you are right, Sir Peregrine. I will go at once to my room. And then——”

“Then, perhaps,—in the course of the morning, you will see me again.”

“Where?—will you come to me there?”

“I will see you in her room, in her dressing-room. She will be down stairs, you know.” From which last words the tidings were conveyed to Lady Mason that she was not to see Mrs. Orme again.

And then she went, and as she slowly made her way across the hall she felt that all of evil, all of punishment that she had ever anticipated, had now fallen upon her. There are periods in the lives of some of us—I trust but of few—when, with the silent inner voice of suffering, we call on the mountains to fall and crush us, and on the earth to gape open and take us in. When, with an agony of intensity, we wish that our mothers had been barren. In those moments the poorest and most desolate are objects to us of envy, for their sufferings can be as nothing to our own. Lady Mason, as she crept silently across the hall, saw a servant girl pass down towards the entrance to the kitchen, and would have given all, all that she had in the world, to have changed places with that girl. But no change

was possible to her. Neither would the mountains crush her, nor would the earth take her in. There was her burden, and she must bear it to the end. There was the bed which she had made for herself, and she must lie upon it. No escape was possible to her. She had herself mixed the cup, and she must now drink of it to the dregs.

Slowly and very silently she made her way up to her own room, and having closed the door behind her sat herself down upon the bed. It was as yet early in the morning, and the servant had not been in the chamber. There was no fire there although it was still midwinter. Of such details as these Sir Peregrine had remembered nothing when he recommended her to go to her own room. Nor did she think of them at first as she placed herself on the bedside. But soon the bitter air pierced her through and through, and she shivered with the cold as she sat there. After a while she got herself a shawl, wrapped it close around her, and then sat down again. She bethought herself that she might have to remain in this way for hours, so she rose again and locked the door. It would add greatly to her immediate misery if the servants were to come while she was there, and see her in her wretchedness. Presently the girls did come, and being unable to obtain entrance were told by Lady Mason that she wanted the chamber for the present. Whereupon they offered to light the fire, but she declared that she was not cold. Her teeth were shaking in her head, but any suffering was better than the suffering of being seen.

She did not lie down, or cover herself further than she was covered with that shawl, nor did she move from her place for more than an hour. By degrees she

became used to the cold. She was numbed, and, as it were, half dead in all her limbs, but she ceased to shake as she sat there, and her mind had gone back to the misery of her position. There was so much for her behind that was worse! What should she do when even this retirement should not be allowed to her? Instead of longing for the time when she should be summoned to Sir Peregrine, she dreaded its coming. It would bring her nearer to that other meeting when she would have to bow her head and crouch before her son.

She had been there above an hour and was in truth ill with the cold when she heard,—and scarcely heard,—a light step come quickly along the passage towards the door. Her woman's ear instantly told her who owned that step, and her heart once more rose with hope. Was she coming there to comfort her, to speak to the poor bruised sinner one word of feminine sympathy? The quick, light step stopped at the door, there was a pause, and then a low, low knock was heard. Lady Mason asked no question, but dropping from the bed hurried to the door and turned the key. She turned the key, and as the door was opened half hid herself behind it;—and then Mrs. Orme was in the room.

“What! you have no fire?” she said, feeling that the air struck her with a sudden chill. “Oh, this is dreadful! My poor, poor dear!” And then she took hold of both Lady Mason's hands. Had she possessed the wisdom of the serpent as well as the innocence of the dove she could not have been wiser in her first mode of addressing the sufferer. For she knew it all. During that dreadful hour Sir Peregrine had told her the whole story; and very dreadful that hour had been to

her. He, when he attempted to give counsel in the matter had utterly failed. He had not known what to suggest, nor could she say what it might be wisest for them all to do; but on one point her mind had been at once resolved. The woman who had once been her friend, whom she had learned to love, should not leave the house without some sympathy and womanly care. The guilt was very bad; yes, it was terrible; she acknowledged that it was a thing to be thought of only with shuddering. But the guilt of twenty years ago did not strike her senses so vividly as the abject misery of the present day. There was no pity in her bosom for Mr. Joseph Mason when she heard the story, but she was full of pity for her who had committed the crime. It was twenty years ago, and had not the sinner repented? Besides, was she to be the judge? "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged," she said when she thought that Sir Peregrine spoke somewhat harshly in the matter. So she said, altogether misinterpreting the Scripture in her desire to say something in favour of the poor woman.

But when it was hinted to her that Lady Mason might return to Orley Farm without being again seen by her, her woman's heart at once rebelled. "If she has done wrong," said Mrs. Orme——

"She has done great wrong—fearful wrong," said Sir Peregrine.

"It will not hurt me to see her because she has done wrong. Not see her while she is in the house! If she were in the prison, would I not go to see her?" And then Sir Peregrine had said no more, but he loved his daughter-in-law all the better for her unwonted vehemence.

"You will do what is right," he said—"as you

always do." Then he left her; and she, after standing for a few moments while she shaped her thoughts, went straight away to Lady Mason's room.

She took Lady Mason by both her hands and found that they were icy cold. "Oh, this is dreadful," she said. "Come with me, dear." But Lady Mason still stood, up by the bed-head, whither she had retreated from the door. Her eyes were still cast upon the ground and she leaned back as Mrs. Orme held her, as though by her weight she would hinder her friend from leading her from the room.

"You are frightfully cold," said Mrs. Orme.

"Has he told you?" said Lady Mason, asking the question in the lowest possible whisper, and still holding back as she spoke.

"Yes; he has told me;—but no one else—no one else." And then for a few moments nothing was spoken between them.

"Oh, that I could die!" said the poor wretch, expressing in words that terrible wish that the mountains might fall upon her and crush her.

"You must not say that. That would be wicked, you know. He can comfort you. Do you not know that He will comfort you, if you are sorry for your sins and go to Him?"

But the woman in her intense suffering could not acknowledge to herself any idea of comfort. "Ah, me!" she exclaimed, with a deep bursting sob which went straight to Mrs. Orme's heart. And then a convulsive fit of trembling seized her so strongly that Mrs. Orme could hardly continue to hold her hands.

"You are ill with the cold," she said. "Come with me, Lady Mason, you shall not stay here longer."

Lady Mason then permitted herself to be led out of

the room, and the two went quickly down the passage to the head of the front stairs, and from thence to Mrs. Orme's room. In crossing the house they had seen no one and been seen by no one; and Lady Mason when she came to the door hurried in, that she might again hide herself in security for the moment. As soon as the door was closed Mrs. Orme placed her in an arm-chair which she wheeled up to the front of the fire, and seating herself on the stool at the poor sinner's feet, chafed her hands within her own. She took away the shawl and made her stretch out her feet towards the fire, and thus seated close to her, she spoke no word for the next half-hour as to the terrible fact that had become known to her. Then on a sudden, as though the ice of her heart had thawed from the warmth of the other's kindness, Lady Mason burst into a flood of tears, and flinging herself upon her friend's neck and bosom begged with earnest piteousness to be forgiven.

And Mrs. Orme did forgive her. Many will think that she was wrong to do so, and I fear it must be acknowledged that she was not strong minded. By forgiving her I do not mean that she pronounced absolution for the sin of past years, or that she endeavoured to make the sinner think that she was no worse for her sin. Mrs. Orme was a good church-woman but not strong, individually, in points of doctrine. All that she left mainly to the woman's conscience and her own dealings with her Saviour,—merely saying a word of salutary counsel as to a certain spiritual pastor who might be of aid. But Mrs. Orme forgave her,—as regarded herself. She had already, while all this was unknown, taken this woman to her heart as pure and good. It now appeared that

the woman had not been pure, had not been good!—And then she took her to her heart again! Criminal as the woman was, disgraced and debased, subject almost to the heaviest penalties of outraged law and justice, a felon against whom the actual hands of the law's myrmidons would probably soon prevail, a creature doomed to bear the scorn of the lowest of her fellow creatures,—such as she was, this other woman, pure and high, so shielded from the world's impurity that nothing ignoble might touch her,—this lady took her to her heart again and promised in her ear with low sweet words of consolation that they should still be friends. I cannot say that Mrs. Orme was right. That she was weak minded I feel nearly certain. But, perhaps, this weakness of mind may never be brought against her to her injury, either in this world or in the next.

I will not pretend to give the words which passed between them at that interview. After a while Lady Mason allowed herself to be guided all in all by her friend's advice as though she herself had been a child. It was decided that for the present,—that is for the next day or two—Lady Mason should keep her room at The Cleeve as an invalid. Counterfeit in this there would be none certainly, for indeed she was hardly fit for any place but her own bed. If inclined and able to leave her room, she should be made welcome to the use of Mrs. Orme's dressing-room. It would only be necessary to warn Peregrine that for the present he must abstain from coming there. The servants, Mrs. Orme said, had heard of their master's intended marriage. They would now hear that this intention had been abandoned. On this they would put their own construction, and would account in their own fashion

for the fact that Sir Peregrine and his guest no longer saw each other. But no suspicion of the truth would get abroad when it was seen that Lady Mason was still treated as a guest at The Cleeve. As to such future steps as might be necessary to be taken, Mrs. Orme would consult with Sir Peregrine, and tell Lady Mason from time to time. And as for the sad truth, the terrible truth,—that, at any rate for the present, should be told to no other ears. And so the whole morning was spent, and Mrs. Orme saw neither Sir Peregrine nor her son till she went down to the library in the first gloom of the winter evening.

CHAPTER XIX

A WOMAN'S IDEA OF FRIENDSHIP

SIR PEREGRINE, after the hour that he had spent with his daughter-in-law,—that terrible hour during which Lady Mason had sat alone on the bedside—returned to the library and remained there during the whole of the afternoon. It may be remembered that he had agreed to ride through the woods with his grandson; but that purpose had been abandoned early in the day, and Peregrine had in consequence been hanging about the house. He soon perceived that something was amiss, but he did not know what. He had looked for his mother, and had indeed seen her for a moment at her door; but she had told him that she could not then speak to him. Sir Peregrine also had shut himself up, but about the hour of dusk he sent for his grandson; and when Mrs. Orme, on leaving Lady Mason, went down to the library, she found them both together.

They were standing with their backs to the fire, and the gloom in the room was too dark to allow of their faces being seen, but she felt that the conversation between them was of a serious nature. Indeed what conversation in that house could be other than serious on that day? "I see that I am disturbing you," she said, preparing to retreat. "I did not know that you were together."

"Do not go, Edith," said the old man. "Peregrine,

put a chair for your mother. I have told him that all this is over now between me and Lady Mason."

She trembled as she heard the words, for it seemed to her that there must be danger now in even speaking of Lady Mason,—danger with reference to that dreadful secret, the divulging of which would be so fatal.

"I have told him," continued Sir Peregrine, "that for a few minutes I was angry with him when I heard from Lady Mason that he had spoken to her; but I believe that on the whole it is better that it should have been so."

"He would be very unhappy if anything that he had done had distressed you," said Mrs. Orme, hardly knowing what words to use, or how to speak. Nor did she feel quite certain as yet how much had been told to her son, and how much was concealed from him.

"No, no, no," said the old man, laying his arm affectionately on the young man's shoulder. "He has done nothing to distress me. There is nothing wrong—nothing wrong between him and me. Thank God for that. But, Perry, we will think now of that other matter. Have you told your mother anything about it?" And he strove to look away from the wretchedness of his morning's work to something in his family that still admitted of a bright hope.

"No, Sir; not yet. We won't mind that just now." And then they all remained silent, Mrs. Orme sitting, and the two men still standing with their backs towards the fire. Her mind was too intent on the unfortunate lady up stairs to admit of her feeling interest in that other unknown matter to which Sir Peregrine had alluded.

"If you have done with Perry," she said at last, "I would be glad to speak to you for a minute or two."

"Oh yes," said Peregrine;—"we have done." And then he went.

"You have told him," said she, as soon as they were left together.

"Told him; what, of her? Oh no. I have told him that that,—that idea of mine has been abandoned." From this time forth Sir Peregrine could never endure to speak of his proposed marriage, nor to hear it spoken of. "He conceives that this has been done at her instance," he continued.

"And so it has," said Mrs. Orme, with much more decision in her voice than was customary with her.

"And so it has," he repeated after her.

"Nobody must know of this,"—said she very solemnly, standing up and looking into his face with eager eyes. "Nobody but you and I."

"All the world, I fear, will know it soon," said Sir Peregrine.

"No; no. Why should all the world know it? Had she not told us we should not have known it. We should not have suspected it. Mr. Furnival, who understands these things;—he does not think her guilty."

"But, Edith—the property!"

"Let her give that up—after a while; when all this has passed by. That man is not in want. It will not hurt him to be without it a little longer. It will be enough for her to do that when this trial shall be over."

"But it is not hers. She cannot give it up. It belongs to her son,—or is thought to belong to him. It is not for us to be informers, Edith——"

"No, no; it is not for us to be informers. We must remember that."

"Certainly. It is not for us to tell the story of her guilt; but her guilt will remain the same, will be acted over and over again every day, while the proceeds of the property go into the hands of Lucius Mason. It is that which is so terrible, Edith;—that her conscience should have been able to bear that load for the last twenty years! A deed done,—that admits of no restitution, may admit of repentance. We may leave that to the sinner and his conscience, hoping that he stands right with his Maker. But here, with her, there has been a continual theft going on from year to year,—which is still going on. While Lucius Mason holds a sod of Orley Farm, true repentance with her must be impossible. It seems so to me." And Sir Peregrine shuddered at the doom which his own rectitude of mind and purpose forced him to pronounce.

"It is not she that has it," said Mrs. Orme. "It was not done for herself."

"There is no difference in that," said he sharply. "All sin is selfish, and so was her sin in this. Her object was the aggrandisement of her own child; and when she could not accomplish that honestly, she did it by fraud, and—and—and——. Edith my dear, you and I must look at this thing as it is. You must not let your kind heart make your eyes blind in a matter of such moment."

"No, father; nor must the truth make our hearts cruel. You talk of restitution and repentance. Repentance is not the work of a day. How are we to say by what struggles her poor heart has been torn?"

"I do not judge her."

"No, no; that is it. We may not judge her; may we? But we may assist her in her wretchedness. I have promised that I will do all I can to aid her. You

will allow me to do so;—you will; will you not?" And she pressed his arm and looked up into his face, entreating him. Since first they two had known each other, he had never yet denied her a request. It was a law of his life that he would never do so. But now he hesitated, not thinking that he would refuse her, but feeling that on such an occasion it would be necessary to point out to her how far she might go without risk of bringing censure on her own name. But in this case, though the mind of Sir Peregrine might be the more logical, the purpose of his daughter-in-law was the stronger. She had resolved that such communication with crime would not stain her, and she already knew to what length she would go in her charity. Indeed her mind was fully resolved to go far enough.

"I hardly know as yet what she intends to do; any assistance you can give her must, I should say, depend on her own line of conduct."

"But I want your advice as to that. I tell you what I purpose. It is clear that Mr. Furnival thinks she will gain the day at this trial."

"But Mr. Furnival does not know the truth."

"Nor will the judge and the lawyers, and all the rest. As you say so properly, it is not for us to be the informers. If they can prove it, let them. But you would not have her tell them all against herself?" And then she paused, waiting for his answer.

"I do not know. I do not know what to say. It is not for me to advise her."

"Ah, but it is for you," she said; and as she spoke she put her little hand down on the table with an energy which startled him. "She is here—a wretched woman, in your house. And why do you know the truth? Why has it been told to you and me? Because

without telling it she could not turn you from that purpose of yours. It was generous, father—confess that; it was very generous.”

“Yes, it was generous,” said Sir Peregrine.

“It was very generous. It would be base in us if we allowed ourselves to forget that. But I was telling you my plan. She must go to this trial.”

“Oh yes; there will be no doubt as to that.”

“Then—if she can escape, let the property be given up afterwards.”

“I do not see how it is to be arranged. The property will belong to Lucius, and she cannot give it up then. It is not so easy to put matters right when guilt and fraud have set them wrong.”

“We will do the best we can. Even suppose that you were to tell Lucius afterwards;—you yourself! if that were necessary, you know.”

And so by degrees she talked him over; but yet he would come to no decision as to what steps he himself must take. What if he himself should go to Mr. Round, and pledge himself that the whole estate should be restored to Mr. Mason of Groby, on condition that the trial were abandoned? The world would probably guess the truth after that; but the terrible trial and the more terrible punishment which would follow it might be thus escaped. Poor Sir Peregrine! Even when he argued thus within himself, his conscience told him that in taking such a line of conduct, he himself would be guilty of some outrage against the law by aiding a criminal in her escape. He had heard of misprision of felony; but nevertheless, he allowed his daughter-in-law to prevail. Before such a step as this could be taken the consent of Lady Mason must of course be obtained; but as to that Mrs. Orme had no doubt. If

Lucius could be induced to abandon the property without hearing the whole story, it would be well. But if that could not be achieved,—then the whole story must be told to him. “And you will tell it,” Mrs. Orme said to him. “It would be easier for me to cut off my right arm,” he answered; “but I will do my best.”

And then came the question as to the place of Lady Mason's immediate residence. It was evident to Mrs. Orme that Sir Peregrine expected that she would at once go back to Orley Farm;—not exactly on that day, nor did he say on the day following. But his words made it very manifest that he did not think it right that she should under existing circumstances remain at The Cleeve. Sir Peregrine, however, as quickly understood that Mrs. Orme did not wish her to go away for some days.

“It would injure the cause if she were to leave us quite at once,” said Mrs. Orme.

“But how can she stay here, my dear,—with no one to see her; with none but the servants to wait upon her?”

“I should see her,” said Mrs. Orme boldly.

“Do you mean constantly—in your old, friendly way?”

“Yes, constantly; and,” she added after a pause, “not only here, but at Orley Farm also.” And then there was another pause between them.

Sir Peregrine certainly was not a cruel man, nor was his heart by any means hardened against the lady with whom circumstances had lately joined him so closely. Indeed, since the knowledge of her guilt had fully come upon him, he had undertaken the conduct of her perilous affairs in a manner more confidential even than that which had existed while he expected

to make her his wife. But, nevertheless, it went sorely against the grain with him when it was proposed that there should still exist a close intimacy between the one cherished lady of his household and the woman who had been guilty of so base a crime. It seemed to him that he might touch pitch and not be defiled;—he or any man belonging to him. But he could not reconcile it to himself that the widow of his son should run such risk. In his estimation there was something almost more than human about the purity of the only woman that blessed his hearth. It seemed to him as though she were a sacred thing, to be guarded by a shrine,—to be protected from all contact with the pollution of the outer world. And now it was proposed to him that she should take a felon to her bosom as her friend!

“But will that be necessary, Edith?” he said; “and after all that has been revealed to us now, will it be wise?”

“I think so,” she said, speaking again with a very low voice. “Why should I not?”

“Because she has shown herself unworthy of such friendship;—unfit for it, I should say.”

“Unworthy! Dear father, is she not as worthy and as fit as she was yesterday? If we saw clearly into each other's bosoms, whom should we think worthy?”

“But you would not choose for your friend one—one who could do such a deed as that?”

“No; I would not choose her because she had so acted; or perhaps if I knew all beforehand would I open my heart to one who had so done. But it is different now. What are love and friendship worth if they cannot stand against such trials as these?”

"Do you mean, Edith, that no crime would separate you from a friend?"

"I have not said that. There are circumstances always. But if she repents,—as I am sure she does, I cannot bring myself to desert her. Who else is there that can stand by her now; what other woman? At any rate I have promised her, and you would not have me break my word."

Thus she again gained her point, and it was settled that for the present Lady Mason should be allowed to occupy her own room,—her own room, and occasionally Mrs. Orme's sitting-room, if it pleased her to do so. No day was named for her removal, but Mrs. Orme perfectly understood that the sooner such a day could be fixed the better Sir Peregrine would be pleased. And, indeed, his household as at present arranged was not a pleasant one. The servants had all heard of his intended marriage, and now they must also hear that that intention was abandoned. And yet the lady would remain up stairs as a guest of his! There was much in this that was inconvenient; but under circumstances as they now existed, what could he do?

When all this was arranged and Mrs Orme had dressed for dinner, she again went to Lady Mason. She found her in bed, and told her that at night she would come to her and tell her all. And then she instructed her own servant as to attending upon the invalid. In doing this she was cunning in letting the word fall here and there, that might teach the woman that that marriage purpose was all over; but nevertheless here was so much care and apparent affection in her mode of speaking, and she gave her orders for Lady Mason's comfort with so much earnestness, that no idea

could get abroad in the household that there had been any cause for absolute quarrel.

Late at night, when her son had left her, she did go again to her guest's room, and sitting down by the bedside she told her all that had been planned, pointing out however with much care that, as a part of those plans, Orley Farm was to be surrendered to Joseph Mason. "You think that is right; do you not?" said Mrs. Orme, almost trembling as she asked a question so pertinent to the deed which the other had done, and to that repentance for the deed which was now so much to be desired.

"Yes," said the other, "of course it will be right," and then the thought that it was not in her power to abandon the property occurred to her also. If the estate must be voluntarily surrendered, no one could so surrender it but Lucius Mason. She knew this, and felt at the moment that of all men he would be the least likely to do so, unless an adequate reason was made clearly plain to him. The same thought at the same moment was passing through the minds of them both; but Lady Mason could not speak out her thought, and Mrs. Orme would not say more on that terrible day to trouble the mind of the poor creature whose sufferings she was so anxious to assuage.

And then Lady Mason was left alone, and having now a partner in her secret, slept sounder than she had done since the tidings first reached her of Mr. Dockwrath's vengeance.

CHAPTER XX

THE GEM OF THE FOUR FAMILIES

AND now we will go back to Noningsby. On that evening Graham ate his pheasant with a relish although so many cares sat heavy on his mind, and declared, to Mrs. Baker's great satisfaction, that the cook had managed to preserve the bread sauce uninjured through all the perils of delay which it had encountered.

"Bread sauce is so ticklish; a simmer too much and it's clean done for," Mrs. Baker said with a voice of great solicitude. But she had been accustomed perhaps to patients whose appetites were fastidious. The pheasant and the bread sauce and the mashed potatoes, all prepared by Mrs. Baker's own hand to be eaten as spoon meat, disappeared with great celerity; and then, as Graham sat sipping the solitary glass of sherry that was allowed to him, meditating that he would begin his letter the moment the glass was empty, Augustus Staveley again made his appearance.

"Well, old fellow," said he, "how are you now?" and he was particularly careful so to speak as to show by his voice that his affection for his friend was as strong as ever. But in doing so he showed also that there was some special thought still present in his mind,—some feeling which was serious in its nature if not absolutely painful.

"Staveley," said the other, gravely, "I have acquired

knowledge to-day which I trust I may carry with me to my grave."

"And what is that?" said Augustus, looking round to Mrs. Baker as though he thought it well that she should be out of the room before the expected communication was made. But Mrs. Baker's attention was so riveted by her patient's earnestness, that she made no attempt to go."

"It is a wasting of the best gifts of Providence," said Graham, "to eat a pheasant after one has really done one's dinner."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Augustus.

"So it is, Sir," said Mrs. Baker, thinking that the subject quite justified the manner.

"And of no use whatsoever to eat only a little bit of one as a man does then. To know what a pheasant is you should have it all to yourself."

"So you should, Sir," said Mrs. Baker, quite delighted and very much in earnest.

"And you should have nothing else. Then, if the bird be good to begin with, and has been well hung——"

"There's a deal in that," said Mrs. Baker.

"Then, I say, you'll know what a pheasant is. That's the lesson which I have learned to-day, and I give it you as an adequate return for the pheasant itself."

"I was almost afeard it would be spoilt by being brought up the second time," said Mrs. Baker. "And so I said to my lady; but she wouldn't have you woke, nohow." And then Mrs. Baker, having heard the last of the lecture took away the empty wineglass and shut the door behind her.

"And now I'll write those two letters," said Graham.

"What I've written hitherto I wrote in bed, and I feel almost more awkward now I am up than I did then."

"But what letters are they?"

"Well, one to my laundress to tell her I shall be there to-morrow, and one to Mary Snow to say that I'll see her the day after."

"Then, Felix, don't trouble yourself to write either. You positively won't go to-morrow——"

"Who says so?"

"The governor. He has heard from my mother exactly what the doctor said, and declares that he won't allow it. He means to see the doctor himself before you stir. And he wants to see you also. I am to tell you he'll come to you directly after breakfast."

"I shall be delighted to see your father, and am very much gratified by his kindness, but——"

"But what——"

"I'm a free agent, I suppose,—to go when I please?"

"Not exactly. The law is unwritten; but by traditional law a man laid up in his bedroom is not free to go and come. No action for false imprisonment would lie if Mrs. Baker kept all your clothes away from you."

"I should like to try the question."

"You will have the opportunity, for you may be sure that you'll not leave this to-morrow."

"It would depend altogether on the evidence of the doctor."

"Exactly so. And as the doctor in this case would clearly be on the side of the defendants, a verdict on behalf of the plaintiff would not be by any means attainable." After that the matter was presumed to be settled, and Graham said no more as to leaving Non-

ingsby on the next day. As things turned out afterwards he remained there for another week.

"I must at any rate write a letter to Mary Snow," he said. And to Mary Snow he did write some three or four lines, Augustus sitting by the while. Augustus Staveley would have been very glad to know the contents, or rather the spirit of those lines; but nothing was said about them, and the letter was at last sealed up and intrusted to his care for the post-bag. There was very little in it that could have interested Augustus Staveley or any one else. It contained the ordinary, but no more than the ordinary terms of affection. He told her that he found it impracticable to move himself quite immediately. And then as to that cause of displeasure,—that cause of supposed displeasure as to which both Mary and Mrs. Thomas had written, he declared that he did not believe that anything had been done that he should not find it easy to forgive after so long an absence.

Augustus then remained there for another hour, but not a word was said between the young men on that subject which was nearest, at the moment, to the hearts of both of them. Each was thinking of Madeline, but neither of them spoke as though any such subject were in their thoughts.

"Heaven and earth!" said Augustus at last, pulling out his watch. "It only wants three minutes to seven. I shall have a dozen messages from the judge before I get down, to know whether he shall come and help me change my boots. I'll see you again before I go to bed. Good-bye, old fellow." And then Graham was again alone.

"If Lady Staveley were really angry with him for loving her daughter,—if his friend Staveley were in

very truth determined that such love must under no circumstances be sanctioned,—would they treat him as they were treating him? Would they under such circumstances make his prolonged stay in the house an imperative necessity? He could not help asking himself this question, and answering it with some gleam of hope. And then he acknowledged to himself that it was ungenerous in him to do so. His remaining there,—the liberty to remain there which had been conceded to him,—had arisen solely from the belief that a removal in his present state would be injudicious. He assured himself of this over and over again, so that no false hope might linger in his heart. And yet hope did linger there whether false or true. Why might he not aspire to the hand of Madeline Staveley,—he who had been assured that he need regard no woman as too high for his aspirations?

“Mrs. Baker,” he said that evening, as that excellent woman was taking away his tea-things, “I have not heard Miss Staveley’s voice these two days.”

“Well, no; no more you have,” said she. “There’s two ways, you know, Mr. Graham, of going to her part of the house. There’s the door that opens at the end of the passage by her mamma’s room. She’s been that way, and that’s the reason, I suppose. There ain’t no other, I’m sure.”

“One likes to hear one’s friends if one can’t see them; that’s all.”

“To be sure one does. I remember as how when I had the measles—I was living with my lady’s mother, as maid to the young ladies. There was four of ’em, and I dressed ’em all—God bless ’em. They’ve all got husbands now and grown up families—only there ain’t one among ’em equal to our Miss Madeline, though

there's some of 'em much richer. When my lady married him,—the judge, you know,—he was the poorest of the lot. They didn't think so much of him when he came a-courting in those days."

"He was only a practising barrister then."

"Oh yes; he knew well how to practise, for Miss Isabella—as she was then—very soon made up her mind about him. Laws, Mr. Graham, she used to tell me everything in them days. They didn't want her to have nothing to say to Mr. Staveley at first; but she made up her mind, and though she wasn't one of them as has many words, like Miss Furnival down there, there was no turning her."

"Did she marry at last against their wish?"

"Oh dear, no; nothing of that sort. She wasn't one of them flighty ones neither. She just made up her own mind and bided. And now I don't know whether she hasn't done about the best of 'em all. Them Oliphants is full of money, they do say—full of money. That was Miss Louisa, who came next. But, Lord love you, Mr. Graham, he's so crammed with gout as he can't ever put a foot to the ground; and as cross;—as cross as cross. We goes there sometimes, you know. Then the girls is all plain; and young Mr. Oliphant, the son,—why he never so much as speaks to his own father; and though they're rolling in money, they say he can't pay for the coat on his back. Now our Mr. Augustus, unless it is that he won't come down to morning prayers and always keeps the dinner waiting, I don't think there's ever a black look between him and his papa. And as for Miss Madeline,—she's the gem of the four families. Everybody gives that up to her."

If Madeline's mother married a barrister in opposi-

tion to the wishes of her family—a barrister who then possessed nothing but his wits—why should not Madeline do so also? That was of course the line which his thoughts took. But then as he said to himself, Madeline's father had been one of the handsomest men of his day, whereas he was one of the ugliest; and Madeline's father had been encumbered with no Mary Snow. A man who had been such a fool as he, who had gone so far out of the regular course, thinking to be wiser than other men, but being in truth much more silly, could not look for that success and happiness in life which men enjoy who have not been so lamentably deficient in discretion! 'Twas thus that he lectured himself; but still he went on thinking of Madeline Staveley.

There had been some disagreeable confusion in the house that afternoon after Augustus had spoken to his sister. Madeline had gone up to her own room, and had remained there, chewing the cud of her thoughts. But her sister and her brother had warned her about this man. She could moreover divine that her mother was suffering under some anxiety on the same subject.

Why was all this? Why should these things be said and thought? Why should there be uneasiness in the house on her account in this matter of Mr. Graham? She acknowledged to herself that there was such uneasiness;—and she almost acknowledged to herself the cause.

But while she was still sitting over her own fire, with her needle untouched beside her, her father had come home, and Lady Staveley had mentioned to him that Mr. Graham thought of going on the next day.

“Nonsense, my dear,” said the judge. “He must

not think of such a thing. He can hardly be fit to leave his room yet."

"Pottinger does say that it has gone on very favourably," pleaded Lady Staveley.

"But that's no reason he should destroy the advantages of his healthy constitution by insane imprudence. He's got nothing to do. He wants to go merely because he thinks he is in your way."

Lady Staveley looked wishfully up in her husband's face, longing to tell him all her suspicions. But as yet her grounds for them were so slight that even to him she hesitated to mention them.

"His being here is no trouble to me, of course," she said.

"Of course not. You tell him so, and he'll stay," said the judge. "I want to see him to-morrow myself;—about this business of poor Lady Mason's."

Immediately after that he met his son. And Augustus also told him that Graham was going.

"Oh no; he's not going at all," said the judge. "I've settled that with your mother."

"He's very anxious to be off," said Augustus gravely.

"And why? Is there any reason?"

"Well; I don't know." For a moment he thought he would tell his father the whole story; but he reflected that his doing so would be hardly fair towards his friend. "I don't know that there is any absolute reason; but I'm quite sure that he is very anxious to go."

The judge at once perceived that there was something in the wind, and during that hour in which the pheasant was being discussed up in Graham's room, he succeeded in learning the whole from his wife.

Dear, good, loving wife! A secret of any kind from him was an impossibility to her, although that secret went no further than her thoughts.

"The darling girl is so anxious about him, that—that I'm afraid," said she.

"He's by no means a bad sort of man, my love," said the judge.

"But he's got nothing—literally nothing," said the mother.

"Neither had I, when I went a wooing," said the judge. "But nevertheless, I managed to have it all my own way."

"You don't mean really to make a comparison?" said Lady Staveley. "In the first place you were at the top of your profession."

"Was I? If so I must have achieved that distinction at a very early age." And then he kissed his wife very affectionately. Nobody was there to see, and under such circumstances a man may kiss his wife even though he be a judge, and between fifty and sixty years old. After that he again spoke to his son, and in spite of the resolves which Augustus had made as to what friendship required of him, succeeded in learning the whole truth.

Late in the evening, when all the party had drunk their cups of tea, when Lady Staveley was beginning her nap, and Augustus was making himself agreeable to Miss Furnival—to the great annoyance of his mother, who, half rousing herself every now and then, looked sorrowfully at what was going on with her winking eyes,—the judge contrived to withdraw with Madeline into the small drawing-room, telling her as he put his arm round her waist, that he had a few words to say to her.

"Well, papa," said she, as at his bidding she sat herself down beside him on the sofa. She was frightened, because such summonses were very unusual; but nevertheless her father's manner towards her was always so full of love that even in her fear she felt a comfort in being with him.

"My darling," he said, "I want to ask you one or two questions—about our guest here who has hurt himself,—Mr. Graham."

"Yes, papa." And now she knew that she was trembling with nervous dread.

"You need not think that I am in the least angry with you, or that I suspect you of having done or said, or even thought anything that is wrong. I feel quite confident that I have no cause to do so."

"Oh, thank you, papa."

"But I want to know whether Mr. Graham has ever spoken to you—as a lover."

"Never, papa."

"Because under the circumstances of his present stay here, his doing so would, I think, have been ungenerous."

"He never has, papa, in any way—not a single word."

"And you have no reason to regard him in that light?"

"No, papa." But in the speaking of these last two words there was a slight hesitation,—the least possible shade of doubt conveyed, which made itself immediately intelligible to the practised ear of the judge.

"Tell me all, my darling;—everything that there is in your heart, so that we may help each other if that may be possible."

"He has never said anything to me, papa."

"Because your mamma thinks that you are more anxious about him than you would be about an ordinary visitor."

"Does she?"

"Has any one else spoken to you about Mr. Graham?"

"Augustus did, papa; and Isabella, some time ago."

"Then I suppose they thought the same."

"Yes; I suppose they did."

"And now, dear, is there anything else you would like to say to me about it?"

"No, papa, I don't think there is."

"But remember this always;—that my only wishes respecting you, and your mother's wishes also, are to see you happy and good."

"I am very happy, papa."

"And very good also to the best of my belief." And then he kissed her, and they went back again into the large drawing-room.

Many of my readers, and especially those who are old and wise—if I chance to have any such—will be inclined to think that the judge behaved foolishly in thus cross-questioning his daughter on a matter, which, if it were expedient that it should die away, would die away the more easily the less it were talked about. But the judge was an odd man in many of the theories of his life. One of them, with reference to his children, was very odd, and altogether opposed to the usual practice of the world. It was this,—that they should be allowed, as far as was practicable to do what they liked. Now the general opinion of the world is certainly quite the reverse—namely this, that children, as long as they are under the control of their parents, should be hindered and prevented in those things to which they are most

inclined. Of course the world in general, in carrying out this practice, excuses it by an assertion—made to themselves or others—that children customarily like those things which they ought not to like. But the judge had an idea quite opposed to this. Children, he said, if properly trained, would like those things which were good for them. Now it may be that he thought his daughter had been properly trained.

“He is a very clever young man, my dear; you may be sure of that,” were the last words which the judge said to his wife that night.

“But then he has got nothing,” she replied; “and he is so uncommonly plain.”

The judge would not say a word more, but he could not help thinking that this last point was one which might certainly be left to the young lady.

CHAPTER XXI

THE ANGEL OF LIGHT UNDER A CLOUD

ON the following morning, according to appointment, the judge visited Felix Graham in his room. It was only the second occasion on which he had done so since the accident, and he was therefore more inclined to regard him as an invalid than those who had seen him from day to day.

"I am delighted to hear that your bones have been so amenable," said the judge. "But you must not try them too far. We'll get you down stairs into the drawing-room, and see how you get on there by the next few days."

"I don't want to trouble you more than I can help," said Felix, sheepishly. He knew that there were reasons why he should not go into that drawing-room, but of course he could not guess that those reasons were as well known to the judge as they were to himself.

"You sha'n't trouble us—more than you can help. I am not one of those men who tell my friends that nothing is a trouble. Of course you give trouble."

"I am so sorry!"

"There's your bed to make, my dear fellow, and your gruel to warm. You know Shakespeare pretty well by heart, I believe, and he puts that matter,—as he did every other matter,—in the best and truest point of view. Lady Macbeth didn't say she had no labour in

receiving the king. 'The labour we delight in physics pain,' she said. Those were her words, and now they are mine."

"With a more honest purpose behind," said Felix.

"Well, yes; I've no murder in my thoughts at present. So that is all settled, and Lady Staveley will be delighted to see you down stairs to-morrow."

"I shall be only too happy," Felix answered, thinking within his own mind that he must settle it all in the course of the day with Augustus.

"And now perhaps you will be strong enough to say a few words about business."

"Certainly," said Graham.

"You have heard of this Orley Farm case, in which our neighbour Lady Mason is concerned."

"Oh yes; we were all talking of it at your table;—I think it was the night, or a night or two, before my accident."

"Very well; then you know all about it. At least as much as the public knows generally. It has now been decided on the part of Joseph Mason—the husband's eldest son, who is endeavouring to get the property—that she shall be indicted for perjury."

"For perjury?"

"Yes; and in doing that, regarding the matter from his point of view, they are not deficient in judgment."

"But how could she have been guilty of perjury?"

"In swearing that she had been present when her husband and the three witnesses executed the deed. If they have any ground to stand on—and I believe they have none whatever, but if they have, they would much more easily get a verdict against her on that point than on a charge of forgery. Supposing it to be the fact that her husband never executed such a deed, it would be

manifest that she must have sworn falsely in swearing that she saw him do so."

"Why, yes; one would say so."

"But that would afford by no means conclusive evidence that she had forged the surreptitious deed herself."

"It would be strong presumptive evidence that she was cognizant of the forgery."

"Perhaps so,—but uncorroborated would hardly bring a verdict after such a lapse of years. And then moreover a prosecution for forgery, if unsuccessful, would produce more painful feeling. Whether successful or unsuccessful it would do so. Bail could not be taken in the first instance, and such a prosecution would create a stronger feeling that the poor lady was being persecuted."

"Those who really understand the matter will hardly thank them for their mercy."

"But then so few will really understand it. The fact however is that she will be indicted for perjury. I do not know whether the indictment has not been already laid. Mr. Furnival was with me in town yesterday, and at his very urgent request, I discussed the whole subject with him. I shall be on the Home Circuit myself on these next spring assizes, but I shall not take the criminal business at Alston. Indeed I should not choose that this matter should be tried before me under any circumstances, seeing that the lady is my near neighbour. Now Furnival wants you to be engaged on the defence as junior counsel."

"With himself?"

"Yes; with himself, and with Mr. Chaffanbrass."

"With Mr. Chaffanbrass!" said Graham, in a tone almost of horror—as though he had been asked to

league himself with all that was most disgraceful in the profession;—as indeed perhaps he had been.

“Yes—with Mr. Chaffanbrass.”

“Will that be well, judge, do you think?”

“Mr. Chaffanbrass no doubt is a very clever man, and it may be wise in such a case as this to have the services of a barrister who is perhaps unequalled in his power of cross-examining a witness.”

“Does his power consist in making a witness speak the truth, or in making him conceal it?”

“Perhaps in both. But here, if it be the case as Mr. Furnival suspects, that witnesses will be suborned to give false evidence——”

“But surely the Rounds would have nothing to do with such a matter as that?”

“No, probably not. I am sure that old Richard Round would abhor any such work as you or I would do. They take the evidence as it is brought to them. I believe there is no doubt that at any rate one of the witnesses to the codicil in question will now swear that the signature to the document is not her signature.”

“A woman—is it?”

“Yes; a woman. In such a case it may perhaps be allowable to employ such a man as Mr. Chaffanbrass; and I should tell you also, such another man as Mr. Solomon Aram.”

“Solomon Aram, too! Why, judge, the Old Bailey will be left bare.”

“The shining lights will certainly be down at Alston. Now under those circumstances will you undertake the case?”

“Would you—in my place?”

“Yes; if I were fully convinced of the innocence of my client at the beginning.”

"But what if I were driven to change my opinion as the thing progressed?"

"You must go on, in such a case, as a matter of course."

"I suppose I can have a day or two to think of it?"

"Oh yes. I should not myself be the bearer to you of Mr. Furnival's message, were it not that I think that Lady Mason is being very cruelly used in the matter. If I were a young man in your position, I should take up the case *con amore*, for the sake of beauty and womanhood. I don't say that that Quixotism is very wise; but still I don't think it can be wrong to join yourself even with such men as Chaffanbrass and Mr. Solomon Aram, if you can feel confident that you have justice and truth on your side." Then after a few more words the interview was over, and the judge left the room, making some further observation as to his hope of seeing Graham in the drawing-room on the next day.

On the following morning there came from Peckham two more letters for Graham, one of course from Mary Snow, and one from Mrs. Thomas. We will first give attention to that from the elder lady. She commenced with much awe, declaring that her pen trembled within her fingers, but that nevertheless she felt bound by her conscience and that duty which she owed to Mr. Graham, to tell him everything that had occurred,— "word by word," as she expressed it. And then Felix, looking at the letter, saw that he held in his hand two sheets of letter paper, quite full of small writing, the latter of which was crossed. She went on to say that her care had been unremitting, and her solicitude almost maternal; that Mary's conduct had on the whole been such as to inspire her with "undeviating confidence;" but that the guile of the present age was such, especially

in respect to female servants—who seemed, in Mrs. Thomas's opinion, to be sent in these days express from a very bad place for the express assistance of a very bad gentleman—that it was impossible for any woman, let her be ever so circumspect, to say, "what was what, or who was who." From all which Graham learned that Mrs. Thomas had been "done;" but by the middle of the third page he had as yet learned nothing as to the manner of the doing.

But by degrees the long reel unwinded itself;—angel of light, and all. Mary Snow had not only received but had answered a lover's letter. She had answered that lover's letter by making an appointment with him; and she had kept that appointment,—with the assistance of the agent sent express from that very bad gentleman. All this Mrs. Thomas had only discovered afterwards by finding the lover's letter, and the answer which the angel of light had written. Both of these she copied verbatim, thinking probably that the original documents were too precious to be intrusted to the post; and then ended by saying that an additional year of celibacy, passed under a closer espionage, and with more severe moral training, might still perhaps make Mary Snow fit for the high destiny which had been promised to her.

The only part of this letter which Felix read twice was that which contained the answer from the angel of light to her lover. "You have been very wicked to address me," the angel of light said severely. "And it is almost impossible that I should ever forgive you." If only she could have brought herself to end there! But her nature, which the lover had greatly belied in likening to her name, was not cold enough for this. So she added a few more words very indiscreetly. "As I want to explain to you why I can never see you again, I will

meet you on Thursday afternoon, at half-past four, a little way up Clapham Lane, at the corner of the doctor's wall, just beyond the third lamp." It was the first letter she had ever written to a lover, and the poor girl had betrayed herself by keeping a copy of it.

And then Graham came to Mary Snow's letter to himself, which, as it was short, the reader shall have entire.

"MY DEAR MR. GRAHAM,

"I never was so unhappy in my life, and I am sure I don't know how to write to you. Of course I do not think you will ever see me again unless it be to upbraid me for my perfidy, and I almost hope you won't, for I should sink into the ground before your eyes. And yet I didn't mean to do anything very wrong, and when I did meet him I wouldn't as much as let him take me by the hand;—not of my own accord. I don't know what she has said to you, and I think she ought to have let me read it; but she speaks to me now in such a way that I don't know how to bear it. She has rummaged among everything I have got, but I am sure she could find nothing except those two letters. It wasn't my fault that he wrote to me, though I know now I ought not to have met him. He is quite a genteel young man, and very respectable, in the medical line; only I know that makes no difference now, seeing how good you have been to me. I don't ask you to forgive me, but it nearly kills me when I think of poor papa.

"Yours always, most unhappy, and very sorry for what I have done,

"MARY SNOW."

Poor Mary Snow! Could any man under such circumstances have been angry with her? In the first place

if men will mould their wives, they must expect that kind of thing; and then, after all, was there any harm done? If ultimately he did marry Mary Snow, would she make a worse wife because she had met the apothecary's assistant at the corner of the doctor's wall, under the third lamp-post? Graham, as he sat with the letters before him, made all manner of excuses for her; and this he did the more eagerly, because he felt that he would have willingly made this affair a cause for breaking off his engagement, if his conscience had not told him that it would be unhandsome in him to do so.

When Augustus came he could not show the letters to him. Had he done so it would have been as much as to declare that now the coast was clear as far as he was concerned. He could not now discuss with his friend the question of Mary Snow, without also discussing the other question of Madeline Staveley. So he swept the letters away, and talked almost entirely about the Orley Farm case.

"I only wish I were thought good enough for the chance," said Augustus. "By Heavens! I would work for that woman as I never could work again for any fee that could be offered me."

"So would I; but I don't like my fellow-labourers."

"I should not mind that."

"I suppose," said Graham, "there can be no possible doubt as to her absolute innocence?"

"None whatever. My father has no doubt. Furnival has no doubt. Sir Peregrine has no doubt,—who, by-the-bye, is going to marry her."

"Nonsense!"

"Oh, but he is though. He has taken up her case *con amore* with a vengeance."

"I should be sorry for that. It makes me think him a fool, and her—a very clever woman."

And so that matter was discussed, but not a word was said between them about Mary Snow, or as to that former conversation respecting Madeline Staveley. Each felt that there was a reserve between them; but each felt also that there was no way of avoiding this. "The governor seems determined that you sha'n't stir yet awhile," Augustus said as he was preparing to take his leave.

"I shall be off in a day or two at the furthest all the same," said Graham.

"And you are to drink tea down stairs to-night. I'll come and fetch you as soon as we're out of the dining-room. I can assure you that your first appearance after your accident has been duly announced to the public, and that you are anxiously expected." And then Staveley left him.

So he was to meet Madeline that evening. His first feeling at the thought was one of joy, but he soon brought himself almost to wish that he could leave Noningsby without any such meeting. There would have been nothing in it,—nothing that need have called for observation or remark,—had he not told his secret to Augustus. But his secret had been told to one, and might be known to others in the house. Indeed he felt sure that it was suspected by Lady Staveley. It could not, as he said to himself, have been suspected by the judge, or the judge would not have treated him in so friendly a manner, or have insisted so urgently on his coming down among them.

And then, how should he carry himself in her presence? If he were to say nothing to her, his saying nothing would be remarked; and yet he felt that all his

powers of self-control would not enable him to speak to her in the same manner that he would speak to her sister. He had to ask himself, moreover, what line of conduct he did intend to follow. If he was still resolved to marry Mary Snow, would it not be better that he should take this bull by the horns and upset it at once? In such case, Madeline Staveley must be no more to him than her sister. But then he had two intentions. In accordance with one he would make Mary Snow his wife; and in following the other he would marry Miss Staveley. It must be admitted that the two brides which he proposed to himself were very different. The one that he had moulded for his own purposes was not, as he admitted, quite equal to her of whom nature, education, and birth had had the handling.

Again he dined alone; but on this occasion Mrs. Baker was able to elicit from him no enthusiasm as to his dinner. And yet she had done her best, and placed before him a sweetbread and dish of sea-kale that ought to have made him enthusiastic. "I had to fight with the gardener for that like anything," she said, singing her own praises when he declined to sing them.

"Dear me! They'll think that I am a dreadful person to have in the house."

"Not a bit. Only they sha'n't think as how I'm going to be said 'no' to in that way when I've set my mind on a thing. I know what's going and I know what's proper. Why, laws, Mr. Graham, there's heaps of things there and yet there's no getting of 'em;—unless there's a party or the like of that. What's the use of a garden, I say,—or of a gardener neither if you don't have garden stuff? It's not to look at. Do finish it now;—after all the trouble I had, standing over him in the cold while he cut it."

"Oh dear, oh dear, Mrs. Baker, why did you do that?"

"He thought to perish me, making believe it took him so long to get at it; but I'm not so easily perished; I can tell him that! I'd have stood there till now but what I had it. Miss Madeline seed me as I was coming in, and asked me what I'd been doing."

"I hope you didn't tell her that I couldn't live without sea-kale?"

"I told her that I meant to give you your dinner comfortable as long as you had it up here; and she said——; but laws, Mr. Graham, you don't care what a young lady says to an old woman like me. You'll see her yourself this evening, and then you can tell her whether or no the sea-kale was worth the eating! It's not so badly biled; I will say that for Hannah Cook, though she is rampagious sometimes." He longed to ask her what words Madeline had used, even in speaking on such a subject as this; but he did not dare to do so.

Mrs. Baker was very fond of talking about Miss Madeline, but Graham was by no means assured that he should find an ally in Mrs. Baker if he told her all the truth.

At last the hour arrived, and Augustus came to convey him down to the drawing-room. It was now many days since he had been out of that room, and the very fact of moving was an excitement to him. He hardly knew how he might feel in walking down stairs, and could not quite separate the nervousness arising from his shattered bones from that other nervousness which came from his—shattered heart. The word is undoubtedly a little too strong, but as it is there, there let it stay. When he reached the drawing-room, he

almost felt that he had better decline to enter it. The door however was opened, and he was in the room before he could make up his mind to any such step, and he found himself being walked across the floor to some especial seat, while a dozen kindly anxious faces were crowding round him.

"Here's an arm-chair, Mr. Graham, kept expressly for you, near the fire," said Lady Staveley. "And I am extremely glad to see you well enough to fill it."

"Welcome out of your room, Sir," said the judge. "I compliment you and Pottinger also, upon your quick recovery; but allow me to tell you that you don't yet look like a man fit to rough it alone in London."

"I feel very well, Sir," said Graham.

And then Mrs. Arbuthnot greeted him, and Miss Funnival, and four or five others who were of the party, and he was introduced to one or two whom he had not seen before. Marian too came up to him,—very gently, as though he were as brittle as glass, having been warned by her mother. "Oh, Mr. Felix," she said, "I was so unhappy when your bones were broken. I do hope they won't break again."

And then he perceived that Madeline was in the room and was coming up to him. She had in truth not been there when he first entered, having thought it better, as a matter of strategy, to follow upon his footsteps. He was getting up to meet her, when Lady Staveley spoke to him.

"Don't move, Mr. Graham. Invalids, you know, are chartered."

"I am very glad to see you once more down stairs," said Madeline as she frankly gave him her hand,—not merely touching his,— "very, very glad. But I do hope you will get stronger before you venture to leave

Noningsby. You have frightened us all very much by your terrible accident."

All this she said in her peculiarly sweet silver voice, not speaking as though she were dismayed and beside herself, or in a hurry to get through a lesson which she had taught herself. She had her secret to hide, and had schooled herself how to hide it. But in so schooling herself she had been compelled to acknowledge to herself that the secret did exist. She had told herself that she must meet him, and that in meeting him she must hide it. This she had done with absolute success. Such is the peculiar power of women; and her mother, who had listened not only to every word, but to every tone of her voice, gave her exceeding credit.

"There's more in her than I thought there was," said Sophia Furnival to herself, who had also listened and watched.

"It has not gone very deep with her," said the judge, who on this matter was not so good a judge as Miss Furnival.

"She cares about me just as Mrs. Baker does," said Graham to himself, who was the worst judge of them all. He muttered something quite unintelligible in answer to the kindness of her words; and then Madeline, having gone through her task, retired to the further side of the round table, and went to work among the tea cups.

And then the conversation became general, turning altogether on the affairs of Lady Mason. It was declared as a fact by Lady Staveley that there was to be a marriage between Sir Peregrine Orme and his guest, and all in the room expressed their sorrow. The women were especially indignant. "I have no patience with her," said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "She must know that such

a marriage at his time of life must be ridiculous, and injurious to the whole family."

The women were very indignant,—all except Miss Furnival, who did not say much, but endeavoured to palliate the crimes of Lady Mason in that which she did say. "I do not know that she is more to blame than any other lady who marries a gentleman thirty years older than herself."

"I do then," said Lady Staveley, who delighted in contradicting Miss Furnival. "And so would you too, my dear, if you had known Sir Peregrine as long as I have. And if—if—if—but it does not matter. I am very sorry for Lady Mason,—very. I think she is a woman cruelly used by her own connections; but my sympathies with her would be warmer if she had refrained from using her power over an old gentleman like Sir Peregrine, in the way she has done." In all which expression of sentiment the reader will know that poor dear Lady Staveley was wrong from the beginning to the end.

"For my part," said the judge, "I don't see what else she was to do. If Sir Peregrine asked her, how could she refuse?"

"My dear!" said Lady Staveley.

"According to that, papa, every lady must marry any gentleman that asks her," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"When a lady is under so deep a weight of obligation I don't know how she is to refuse. My idea is that Sir Peregrine should not have asked her."

"And mine too," said Felix. "Unless indeed he did it under an impression that he could fight for her better as her husband than simply as a friend."

"And I feel sure that that is what he did think," said Madeline, from the further side of the table. And her

voice sounded in Graham's ears as the voice of Eve may have sounded to Adam. No; let him do what he might in the world;—whatever might be the form in which his future career should be fashioned, one thing was clearly impossible to him. He could not marry Mary Snow. Had he never learned to know what were the true charms of feminine grace and loveliness, it might have been possible for him to do so, and to have enjoyed afterwards a fair amount of contentment. But now even contentment would be impossible to him under such a lot as that. Not only would he be miserable, but the woman whom he married would be wretched also. It may be said that he made up his mind definitely, while sitting in that arm-chair, that he would not marry Mary Snow. Poor Mary Snow! Her fault in the matter had not been great.

When Graham was again in his room, and the servant who was obliged to undress him had left him, he sat over his fire, wrapped in his dressing-gown, bethinking himself what he would do. "I will tell the judge everything," he said at last. "Then, if he will let me into his house after that, I must fight my own battle." And so he betook himself to bed.

CHAPTER XXII

MRS. FURNIVAL CAN'T PUT UP WITH IT

WHEN Lady Mason last left the chambers of her lawyer in Lincoln's Inn, she was watched by a stout lady as she passed through the narrow passage leading from the Old to the New Square. That fact will I trust be remembered, and I need hardly say that the stout lady was Mrs. Furnival. She had heard betimes of the arrival of that letter with the Hamworth postmark, had felt assured that it was written by the hands of her hated rival, and had at once prepared for action.

"I shall leave this house to-day,—immediately after breakfast," she said to Miss Biggs, as they sat disconsolately at the table with the urn between them.

"And I think you will be quite right, my dear," replied Miss Biggs. "It is your bounden duty to put down such wicked iniquity as this;—not only for your own sake, but for that of morals in general. What in the world is there so beautiful and so lovely as a high tone of moral sentiment?" To this somewhat transcendental question Mrs. Furnival made no reply. That a high tone of moral sentiment as a thing in general, for the world's use, is very good, she was no doubt aware; but her mind at the present moment was fixed exclusively on her own peculiar case. That Tom Furnival should be made to give up seeing that nasty woman who lived at Hamworth, and to give up also having letters from her,—that at present was the extent of her moral

sentiment. His wicked iniquity she could forgive with a facility not at all gratifying to Miss Biggs, if only she could bring about such a result as that. So she merely grunted in answer to the above proposition.

"And will you sleep away from this?" asked Miss Biggs.

"Certainly I will. I will neither eat here, nor sleep here, nor stay here till I know that all this is at an end. I have made up my mind what I will do."

"Well?" asked the anxious Martha.

"Oh, never mind. I am not exactly prepared to talk about it. There are things one can't talk about,—not to anybody. One feels as though one would burst in mentioning it. I do, I know."

Martha Biggs could not but feel that this was hard, but she knew that friendship is nothing if it be not long enduring. "Dearest Kitty!" she exclaimed. "If true sympathy can be of service to you——"

"I wonder whether I could get respectable lodgings in the neighbourhood of Red Lion Square for a week?" said Mrs. Furnival, once more bringing the conversation back from the abstract to the concrete.

In answer to this Miss Biggs of course offered the use of her own bed-room and of her father's house; but her father was an old man, and Mrs. Furnival positively refused to agree to any such arrangement. At last it was decided that Martha should at once go off and look for lodgings in the vicinity of her own home, that Mrs. Furnival should proceed to carry on her own business in her own way,—the cruelty being this, that she would not give the least hint as to what that way might be,—and that the two ladies should meet together in the Red Lion Square drawing-room at the close of the day.

"And about dinner, dear?" asked Miss Biggs.

"I will get something at a pastrycook's," said Mrs. Furnival.

"And your clothes, dear?"

"Rachel will see about them; she knows." Now Rachel was the old female servant of twenty years' standing; and the disappointment experienced by poor Miss Biggs at the ignorance in which she was left was greatly enhanced by a belief that Rachel knew more than she did. Mrs. Furnival would tell Rachel but would not tell her. This was very, very hard, as Miss Biggs felt. But, nevertheless, friendship, sincere friendship is long enduring, and true patient merit will generally receive at last its appropriate reward.

Then Mrs. Furnival had sat down, Martha Biggs having been duly sent forth on the mission after the lodgings, and had written a letter to her husband. This she intrusted to Rachel, whom she did not purpose to remove from that abode of iniquity from which she herself was fleeing, and having completed her letter she went out upon her own work. The letter ran as follows:—

"Harley Street—Friday.

"MY DEAREST TOM,

"I cannot stand this any longer, so I have thought it best to leave the house and go away. I am very sorry to be forced to such a step as this, and would have put up with a good deal first; but there are some things which I cannot put up with,—and won't. I know that a woman has to obey her husband, and I have always obeyed you, and thought it no hardship even when I was left so much alone; but a woman is not to see a slut brought in under her very nose,—and I won't put up with it. We've been married now

going on over twenty-five years, and it's terrible to think of being driven to this. I almost believe it will drive me mad, and then, when I'm a lunatic, of course you can do as you please.

"I don't want to have any secrets from you. Where I shall go I don't yet know, but I've asked Martha Biggs to take lodgings for me somewhere near her. I must have somebody to speak to now and again, so you can write to 23 Red Lion Square till you hear further. It's no use sending for me, for I *won't come*;— not till I know that you think better of your present ways of going on. I don't know whether you have the power to get the police to come after me, but I advise you not. If you do anything of that sort the people about shall hear of it.

"And now, Tom, I want to say one word to you. You can't think it's a happiness to me going away from my own home where I have lived respectable so many years, or leaving you whom I've loved with all my whole heart. It makes me very, very unhappy, so that I could sit and cry all day if it weren't for pride and because the servants shouldn't see me. To think that it has come to this after all! Oh, Tom, I wonder whether you ever think of the old days when we used to be so happy in Keppel Street! There wasn't anybody then that you cared to see, except me;—I do believe that. And you'd always come home then, and I never thought bad of it though you wouldn't have a word to speak to me for hours. Because you were doing your duty. But you ain't doing your duty now, Tom. You know you ain't doing your duty when you never dine at home, and come home so cross with wine that you curse and swear, and have that nasty woman coming to see you at your chambers. Don't tell me it's

about law business. Ladies don't go to barristers' chambers about law business. All that is done by attorneys. I've heard you say scores of times that you never would see people themselves, and yet you see her.

"Oh, Tom, you have made me so wretched! But I can forgive it all, and will never say another word about it to fret you, if you'll only promise me to have nothing more to say to that woman. Of course I'd like you to come home to dinner, but I'd put up with that. You've made your own way in the world, and perhaps it's only right you should enjoy it. I don't think so much dining at the club can be good for you, and I'm afraid you'll have gout, but I don't want to bother you about that. Send me a line to say that you won't see her any more, and I'll come back to Harley Street at once. If you can't bring yourself to do that, you—and—I—must—part. I can put up with a great deal, but I can't put up with that;—*and won't*."

"Your affectionate loving wife,

"C. FURNIVAL."

"I wonder whether you ever think of the old days when we used to be so happy in Keppel Street?" Ah me, how often in after life, in those successful days when the battle has been fought and won, when all seems outwardly to go well,—how often is this reference made to the happy days in Keppel Street! It is not the prize that can make us happy; it is not even the winning of the prize, though for the one short half-hour of triumph that is pleasant enough. The struggle, the long hot hour of the honest fight, the grinding work—when the teeth are set, and the skin moist with sweat and rough with dust, when all is doubtful and sometimes desperate, when a man must trust to his

own manhood knowing that those around him trust to it not at all,—that is the happy time of life. There is no human bliss equal to twelve hours of work with only six hours in which to do it. And when the expected pay for that work is worse than doubtful, the inner satisfaction is so much the greater. Oh, those happy days in Keppel Street, or it may be over in dirty lodgings in the Borough, or somewhere near the Marylebone workhouse;—anywhere for a moderate weekly stipend. Those were to us, and now are to others, and always will be to many, the happy days of life. How bright was love, and how full of poetry! Flashes of wit glanced here and there, and how they came home and warmed the cockles of the heart. And the unfrequent bottle! Methinks that wine has utterly lost its flavour since those days. There is nothing like it; long work, grinding weary work, work without pay, hopeless work; but work in which the worker trusts himself, believing it to be good. Let him, like Mahomet, have one other to believe in him, and surely nothing else is needed. “Ah me! I wonder whether you ever think of the old days when we used to be so happy in Keppel Street?”

Nothing makes a man so cross as success, or so soon turns a pleasant friend into a captious acquaintance. Your successful man eats too much and his stomach troubles him; he drinks too much and his nose becomes blue. He wants pleasure and excitement, and roams about looking for satisfaction in places where no man ever found it. He frets himself with his banker's book, and everything tastes amiss to him that has not on it the flavour of gold. The straw of an omnibus always stinks; the linings of the cabs are filthy. There are but three houses round London at which an eatable dinner

may be obtained. And yet a few years since how delicious was that cut of roast goose to be had for a shilling at the eating-house near Golden Square. Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Green, Mrs. Walker and all the other mistresses, are too vapid and stupid and humdrum for endurance. The theatres are dull as Lethe, and politics have lost their salt. Success is the necessary misfortune of life, but it is only to the very unfortunate that it comes early.

Mrs. Furnival, when she had finished her letter and fastened it drew one of the heavy dining-room arm-chairs over against the fire and sat herself down to consider her past life, still holding the letter in her lap. She had not on that morning been very careful with her toilet, as was perhaps natural enough. The cares of the world were heavy on her, and he would not be there to see her. Her hair was rough, and her face was red, and she had hardly had the patience to make straight the collar round her neck. To the eye she was an untidy, angry, cross-looking woman. But her heart was full of tenderness,—full to overflowing. She loved him now as well as ever she had loved him;—almost more as the thought of parting from him pressed upon her! Was he not all in all to her? Had she not worshipped him during her whole life? Could she not forgive him?

Forgive him! Yes. Forgive him with the fullest, frankest, freest pardon, if he would only take forgiveness. Should she burn that letter in the fire, send to Miss Biggs saying that the lodgings were not wanted, and then throw herself at Tom's feet, imploring him to have mercy upon her? All that she could do within her heart, and make her words as passionate, as soft, and as poetical as might be those of a young wife of

twenty. But she felt that such words,—though she could frame the sentence while sitting there—could never get themselves spoken. She had tried it, and it had been of no avail. Not only should she be prepared for softness, but he also must be so prepared and at the same moment. If he should push her from him and call her a fool when she attempted that throwing of herself at his feet, how would it be with her spirit then? No. She must go forth and the letter must be left. If there were any hope of union for the future it must come from a parting for the present. So she went up stairs and summoned Rachel, remaining with her in consultation for some half-hour. Then she descended with her bonnet and shawl, got into a cab while Spooner stood at the door looking very serious, and was driven away,—whither, no one knew in Harley Street except Mrs. Furnival herself, and that cabman.

“She’ll never put her foot inside this hall door again. That’s my idea of the matter,” said Spooner.

“Indeed and she will,” said Rachel, “and be a happier woman than ever she’s been since the house was took.”

“If I know master,” said Spooner, “he’s not the man to get rid of an old woman, easy like that, and then ’ave her back agin.” Upon hearing which words, so very injurious to the sex in general, Rachel walked into the house not deigning any further reply.

And then, as we have seen, Mrs. Furnival was there, standing in the dark shadow of the Lincoln’s Inn passage, when Lady Mason left the lawyer’s chambers. She felt sure that it was Lady Mason, but she could not be quite sure. The woman, though she came out from the entry which led to her husband’s chambers,

might have come down from some other set of rooms. Had she been quite certain she would have attacked her rival there, laying bodily hands upon her in the purlieu of the Lord Chancellor's Court. As it was, the poor bruised creature was allowed to pass by, and as she emerged out into the light at the other end of the passage Mrs. Furnival became quite certain of her identity.

"Never mind," she said to herself. "She sha'n't escape me long. Him I could forgive, if he would only give it up; but as for her—! Let what come of it may, I will tell that woman what I think of her conduct before I am many hours older." Then, giving one look up to the windows of her husband's chambers, she walked forth through the dusty old gate into Chancery Lane, and made her way on foot up to No. 23 Red Lion Square. "I'm glad I've done it," she said to herself as she went; "very glad. There's nothing else for it, when things come to such a head as that." And in this frame of mind she knocked at her friend's door.

"Well!" said Martha Biggs, with her eyes, and mouth, and arms, and heart all open.

"Have you got me the lodgings?" said Mrs. Furnival.

"Yes, close by;—in Orange Street. I'm afraid you'll find them very dull. And what have you done?"

"I have done nothing, and I don't at all mind their being dull. They can't possibly be more dull than Harley Street."

"And I shall be near you; sha'n't I?" said Martha Biggs.

"Umph," said Mrs. Furnival. "I might as well go there at once and get myself settled." So she did, the

affectionate Martha of course accompanying her; and thus the affairs of that day were over.

Her intention was to go down to Hamworth at once, and make her way up to Orley Farm, at which place she believed that Lady Mason was living. Up to this time she had heard no word of the coming trial beyond what Mr. Furnival had told her as to his client's "law business." And whatever he had so told her, she had scrupulously disbelieved. In her mind all that went for nothing. Law business! she was not so blind, so soft, so green, as to be hoodwinked by such stuff as that. Beautiful widows don't have personal interviews with barristers in their chambers over and over again let them have what law business they may. At any rate Mrs. Furnival took upon herself to say that they ought not to have such interviews. She would go down to Orley Farm and she would have an interview with Lady Mason. Perhaps the thing might be stopped in that way.

On the following morning she received a note from her husband the consideration of which delayed her proceedings for that day.

"DEAR KITTY," the note ran.

"I think you are very foolish. If regard for me had not kept you at home, some consideration with reference to Sophia should have done so. What you say about that poor lady at Orley Farm is too absurd for me to answer. If you would have spoken to me about her, I would have told you that which would have set your mind at rest, at any rate as regards her. I cannot do this in a letter, nor could I do it in the presence of your friend, Miss Biggs.

"I hope you will come back at once; but I shall not

add to the absurdity of your leaving your own house by any attempt to bring you back again by force. As you must want money I enclose a check for fifty pounds. I hope you will be back before you want more; but if not I will send it as soon as you ask for it.

“Yours affectionately as always,
“T. FURNIVAL.”

There was about this letter an absence of sentiment, and an absence of threat, and an absence of fuss, which almost overset her. Could it be possible that she was wrong about Lady Mason? Should she go to him and hear his own account before she absolutely declared war by breaking into the enemy's camp at Orley Farm? Then, moreover, she was touched and almost overcome about the money. She wished he had not sent it to her. That money difficulty had occurred to her, and been much discussed in her own thoughts. Of course she could not live away from him if he refused to make her any allowance,—at least not for any considerable time. He had always been liberal as regards money since money had been plenty with him, and therefore she had some supply with her. She had jewels too which were her own; and though, as she had already determined, she would not part with them without telling him what she was about to do, yet she could, if pressed, live in this way for the next twelve months;—perhaps, with close economy, even for a longer time than that. In her present frame of mind she had looked forward almost with gratification to being pinched and made uncomfortable. She would wear her ordinary and more dowdy dresses; she would spend much of her time in reading sermons; she would

get up very early and not care what she ate or drank. In short, she would make herself as uncomfortable as circumstances would admit, and thoroughly enjoy her grievances.

But then this check of fifty pounds, and this offer of as much more as she wanted when that was gone, rather took the ground from under her feet. Unless she herself chose to give way she might go on living in Orange Street to the end of the chapter, with every material comfort about her,—keeping her own brougham if she liked, for the checks she now knew would come without stint. And he would go on living in Harley Street, seeing Lady Mason as often as he pleased. Sophia would be the mistress of the house; and as long as this was so, Lady Mason would not show her face there. Now this was not a course of events to which Mrs. Furnival could bring herself to look forward with satisfaction.

All this delayed her during that day, but before she went to bed she made up her mind that she would at any rate go down to Hamworth. Tom, she knew, was deceiving her; of that she felt morally sure. She would at any rate go down to Hamworth, and trust to her own wit for finding out the truth when there.

CHAPTER XXIII

IT IS QUITE IMPOSSIBLE

ALL was now sadness at The Cleeve. It was soon understood among the servants that there was to be no marriage, and the tidings spread from the house, out among the neighbours and into Hamworth. But no one knew the reason of this change;—none except those three, the woman herself who had committed the crime and the two to whom she had told it. On that same night, the night of the day on which the tale had been told, Lady Mason wrote a line,—almost a single line, to her son.

“DEAREST LUCIUS,

“All is over between me and Sir Peregrine. It is better that it should be so. I write to tell you this without losing an hour. For the present I remain here with my dear—dearest friends.

“Your own affectionate mother,

“M. MASON.”

This note she had written in obedience to the behest of Mrs. Orme, and even under her dictation—with the exception of one or two words, “I remain here with my friends,” Mrs. Orme had said; but Lady Mason had put in the two epithets, and had then declared her own conviction that she had now no right to use such language.

“Yes, of me you may, certainly,” said Mrs. Orme, keeping close to her shoulder.”

"Then I will alter it," said Lady Mason. "I will write it again and say I am staying with you."

But this Mrs. Orme had forbidden. "No; it will be better so," she said. "Sir Peregrine would wish it. I am sure he would. He quite agrees that——" Mrs. Orme did not finish her sentence, but the letter was despatched, written as above. The answer which Lucius sent down before breakfast the next morning was still shorter.

"DEAREST MOTHER,

"I am greatly rejoiced that it is so.

"Your affectionate son,

"L. M."

He sent this note, but he did not go down to her, nor was there any other immediate communication between them.

All was now sadness at The Cleeve. Peregrine knew that that marriage project was over, and he knew also that his grandfather and Lady Mason did not now meet each other; but he knew nothing of the cause, though he could not but remark that he did not see her. On that day she did not come down either to dinner or during the evening; nor was she seen on the following morning. He, Peregrine, felt aware that something had occurred at that interview in the library after breakfast, but was lost in surmising what that something had been. That Lady Mason should have told his grandfather that the marriage must be given up would have been only in accordance with the promise made by her to him; but he did not think that that alone would have occasioned such utter sadness, such deathlike silence in the household. Had there been a quarrel Lady Mason would have gone home;—but she

did not go home. Had the match been broken off without a quarrel, why should she mysteriously banish herself to two rooms so that no one but his mother should see her?

And he too had his own peculiar sorrow. On that morning Sir Peregrine had asked him to ride through the grounds, and it had been the baronet's intention to propose during that ride that he should go over to Noningsby and speak to the judge about Madeline. We all know how that proposition had been frustrated. And now Peregrine, thinking over the matter, saw that his grandfather was not in a position at the present moment to engage himself ardently in any such work. By whatever means or whatever words he had been induced to agree to the abandonment of that marriage engagement, that abandonment weighed very heavily on his spirit. It was plain to see that he was a broken man, broken in heart and in spirit. He shut himself up alone in his library all that afternoon, and had hardly a word to say when he came out to dinner in the evening. He was very pale too, and slow and weak in his step. He tried to smile as he came up to his daughter-in-law in the drawing-room; but his smile was the saddest thing of all. And then Peregrine could see that he ate nothing. He was very gentle in his demeanour to the servants, very courteous and attentive to Mrs. Orme, very kind to his grandson. But yet his mind was heavy,—brooding over some sorrow that oppressed it. On the following morning it was the same, and the grandson knew that he could look to his grandfather for no assistance at Noningsby.

Immediately after breakfast Peregrine got on his horse, without speaking to any one of his intention,—

almost without having formed an intention, and rode off in the direction of Alston. He did not take the road, but went out through The Cleeve woods, on to the common, by which, had he turned to the left, he might have gone to Orley Farm; but when on the top of the rise from Crutchley Bottom he turned to the right, and putting his horse into a gallop, rode along the open ground till he came to an enclosure into which he leaped. From thence he made his way through a farm gate into a green country lane, along which he still pressed his horse, till he found himself divided from the end of a large wood by but one field. He knew the ground well, and the direction in which he was going. He could pass through that wood, and then down by an old farm-house at the other end of it, and so on to the Alston road, within a mile of Noningsby. He knew the ground well, for he had ridden over every field of it. When a man does so after thirty he forgets the spots which he passes in his hurry, but when he does so before twenty he never forgets. That field and that wood Peregrine Orme would never forget. There was the double ditch and bank over which Harriet Tristram had ridden with so much skill and courage. There was the spot on which he had knelt so long, while Felix Graham lay back against him, feeble and almost speechless. And there, on the other side, had sat Madeline on her horse, pale with anxiety but yet eager with hope, as she asked question after question as to him who had been hurt.

Peregrine rode up to the ditch, and made his horse stand while he looked at it. It was there, then, on that spot, that he had felt the first pang of jealousy. The idea had occurred to him that he for whom he had been doing a friend's offices with such zealous kindness was

his worst enemy. Had he—he, Peregrine Orme—broken his arms and legs, or even broken his neck, would she have ridden up, all thoughtless of herself, and thrown her very life into her voice as she had done when she knew that Felix Graham had fallen from his horse? And then he had gone on with his work, aiding the hurt man as zealously as before, but still feeling that he was bound to hate him. And afterwards, at Noningsby, he had continued to minister to him as to his friend—zealously doing a friend's offices, but still feeling that the man was his enemy. Not that he was insincere. There was no place for insincerity or treachery within his heart. The man had done no ill—was a good fellow—was entitled to his kindness by all the social laws which he knew. They two had gone together from the same table to the same spot, and had been close together when the one had come to sorrow. It was his duty to act as Graham's friend; and yet how could he not feel that he must hate him?

And now he sat looking at the fence, wishing—wishing;—no, certainly not wishing that Graham's hurt had been more serious; but wishing that in falling from his horse he might utterly have fallen out of favour with that sweet young female heart; or rather wishing, could he so have expressed it, that he himself might have had the fall, and the broken bones, and all the danger—so that he might also have had the interest which those eyes and that voice had shown.

And then quickly he turned his horse, and without giving the beast time to steady himself he rammed him at the fence. The leap out of the wood into the field was difficult, but that back into the wood was still worse. The up-jump was higher, and the ditch which must be first cleared was broader. Nor did he take it

at the easiest part as he had done on that day when he rode his own horse and then Graham's back into the wood. But he pressed his animal exactly at the spot from which his rival had fallen. There were still the marks of the beast's struggle, as he endeavoured to save himself before he came down, head foremost into the ditch. The bank had been somewhat narrowed and pared away, and it was clearly the last place in the face of the whole opening into the wood, which a rider with his senses about him would have selected for his jump.

The horse knowing his master's humour, and knowing also—which is so vitally important—the nature of his master's courage, jumped at the bank, without pausing. As I have said, no time had been given him to steady himself—not a moment to see where his feet should go, to understand and make the most of the ground he was to use. He jumped and jumped well, but only half gained the top of the bank. The poor brute, urged beyond his power, could not get his hind feet up so near the surface as to give him a fulcrum for a second spring. For a moment he strove to make good his footing, still clinging with his fore feet, and then slowly came down backwards into the ditch, then regained his feet, and dragging himself with an effort from the mud, made his way back into the field. Peregrine Orme had kept his seat throughout. His legs were accustomed to the saddle and knew how to cling to it, while there was a hope that he might struggle through. And now that he was again in the field he wheeled his horse to a greater distance, striking him with his whip, and once more pushed him at the fence. The gallant beast went at it bravely, slightly swerving from the fatal spot to which Peregrine had endeav-

oured once more to guide him, leaped with a full spring from the unworn turf, and, barely touching the bank, landed himself and his master lightly within the precincts of the wood.

"Ah-h!" said Peregrine, shouting angrily at the horse, as though the brute had done badly instead of well. And then he rode down slowly through the wood, and out by Monkton Grange farm, round the moat, and down the avenue, and before long he was standing at Noningsby gate.

He had not made up his mind to any plan of action, nor indeed had he determined that he would ask to see any of the family or even enter the place. The woman at the lodge opened the gate, and he rode in mechanically, asking if any of them were at home. The judge and Mr. Augustus were gone up to London, but my lady and the other ladies were in the house. Mr. Graham had not gone, the woman said in answer to his question; nor did she know when he was going. And then, armed with this information, Peregrine Orme rode round to the stables, and gave up his horse to a groom.

"Yes, Lady Staveley was at home," the servant said at the door. "Would Mr. Orme walk into the drawing-room, where he would find the young ladies?" But Mr. Orme would not do this. He would go into a small book-room with which he was well acquainted, and have his name taken up to Lady Staveley. "He did not," he said, "mean to stay very long; but particularly wished to see Lady Staveley." In a few minutes Lady Staveley came to him, radiant with her sweetest smile, and with both her hands held out to greet him.

"My dear Mr. Orme," she said, "I am delighted to

see you; but what made you run away from us so suddenly?" She had considered her words in that moment as she came across the hall, and had thought that in this way she might best enable him to speak.

"Lady Staveley," he said, "I have come here on purpose to tell you. Has your daughter told you anything?"

"Who—Madeline?"

"Yes, Madeline. I mean Miss Staveley. Has she said anything to you about me?"

"Well; yes, she has. Will you not sit down, Mr. Orme, and then we shall be more comfortable." Hitherto he had stood up, and had blurted out his words with a sudden, determined, and almost ferocious air—as though he were going to demand the girl's hand, and challenge all the household if it were refused him. But Lady Staveley understood his manner and his nature, and liked him almost the better for his abruptness.

"She has spoken to me, Mr. Orme; she has told me of what passed between you on the last day that you were with us."

"And yet you are surprised that I should have gone! I wonder at that, Lady Staveley. You must have known——"

"Well; perhaps I did know; but sit down, Mr. Orme. I won't let you get up in that restless way, if we are to talk together. Tell me frankly; what is it you think that I can do for you?"

"I don't suppose you can do anything;—but I thought I would come over and speak to you. I don't suppose I have any chance?" He had seated himself far back on a sofa, and was holding his hat between his knees, with his eyes fixed on the ground; but as he

spoke the last words he looked round into her face with an anxious inquiring glance which went direct to her heart.

"What can I say, Mr. Orme?"

"Ah, no. Of course nothing. Good-bye, Lady Staveley. I might as well go. I know that I was a fool for coming here. I knew it as I was coming. Indeed I hardly meant to come in when I found myself at the gate."

"But you must not go from us like that."

"I must though. Do you think that I could go in and see her? If I did I should make such a fool of myself that I could never again hold up my head. And I am a fool. I ought to have known that a fellow like me could have no chance with her. I could knock my own head off, if I only knew how, for having made such an ass of myself."

"No one here thinks so of you, Mr. Orme."

"No one here thinks what?"

"That it was—unreasonable in you to propose to Madeline. We all know that you did her much honour."

"Psha!" said he, turning away from her.

"Ah! but you must listen to me. That is what we all think—Madeline herself, and I, and her father. No one who knows you could think otherwise. We all like you, and know how good and excellent you are. And as to worldly station, of course you stand above her."

"Psha!" he said again angrily. How could any one presume to talk of the worldly station of his goddess? For just then Madeline Staveley to him was a goddess!

"That is what we think, indeed, Mr. Orme. As for myself, had my girl come to me telling me that you had

proposed to her, and telling me also that—that—that she felt that she might probably like you, I should have been very happy to hear it." And Lady Staveley as she spoke, put out her hand to him.

"But what did she say?" asked Peregrine, altogether disregarding the hand.

"Ah, she did not say that. She told me that she had declined the honour that you had offered her;—that she did not regard you as she must regard the man to whom she would pledge her heart."

"But did she say that she could never love me?" And now as he asked the question he stood up again, looking down with all his eyes into Lady Staveley's face—that face which would have been so friendly to him, so kind and so encouraging, had it been possible.

"Never is a long word, Mr. Orme."

"Ah, but did she say it? Come, Lady Staveley; I know I have been a fool, but I am not a cowardly fool. If it be so;—if I have no hope tell me at once, that I may go away. In that case I shall be better anywhere out of the county."

"I cannot say that you should have no hope."

"You think then that there is a chance?" and for a moment he looked as though all his troubles were nearly over.

"If you are so impetuous, Mr. Orme, I cannot speak to you. If you will sit down for a minute or two I will tell you exactly what I think about it." And then he sat down, trying to look as though he were not impetuous. "I should be deceiving you if I were not to tell you that she speaks of the matter as though it were all over—as though her answer to you was a final one."

"Ah; I knew it was so."

"But then, Mr. Orme, many young ladies who have

been at the first moment quite as sure of their decision have married the gentlemen whom they refused, and have learned to love them with all their hearts."

"But she isn't like other girls," said Peregrine.

"I believe she is a great deal better than many, but nevertheless she may be like others in that respect. I do not say that it will be so, Mr. Orme. I would not on any account give you hopes which I believed to be false. But if you are anxious in the matter——"

"I am as anxious about it as I am about my soul!"

"Oh, fie, Mr. Orme! You should not speak in that way. But if you are anxious, I would advise you to wait."

"And see her become the wife of some one else."

"Listen to me, Mr. Orme. Madeline is very young. And so indeed are you too;—almost too young to marry as yet, even if my girl were willing that it should be so. But we all like you very much; and as you both are so very young, I think that you might wait with patience—say for a year. Then come to Noningsby again, and try your fortune once more. That is my advice."

"Will you tell me one thing, Lady Staveley?"

"What is that, Mr. Orme?"

"Does she care for any one else?"

Lady Staveley was prepared to do anything she could for her young friend except to answer that question. She did believe that Madeline cared for somebody else—cared very much. But she did not think that any way would be opened by which that caring would be made manifest; and she thought also that if wholly ungratified by any word of intercourse that feeling would die away. Could she have told everything to Peregrine Orme she would have explained to him that

his best chance lay in that liking for Felix Graham; or, rather, that as his rejection had been caused by that liking, his chance would be good again when that liking should have perished from starvation. But all this Lady Staveley could not explain to him; nor would it have been satisfactory to her feelings had it been in her power to do so. Still there remained the question, "Does she care for any one else?"

"Mr. Orme," she said, "I will do all for you that a mother can do or ought to do; but I must not admit that you have a right to ask such a question as that. If I were to answer that now, you would feel yourself justified in asking it again when perhaps it might not be so easy to answer."

"I beg your pardon, Lady Staveley;" and Peregrine blushed up to his eyes. "I did not intend——"

"No; do not beg my pardon, seeing that you have given me no offence. As I said just now, all that a mother can and ought to do I will do for you. I am very frank, and tell you that I should be rejoiced to have you for my son-in-law."

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you."

"But neither by me nor by her father will any constraint ever be put on the inclinations of our child. At any rate as to whom she will not accept she will always be allowed to judge for herself. I have told you that to us you would be acceptable as a suitor; and after that I think it will be best to leave the matter for the present without any further words. Let it be understood that you will spend next Christmas at Noningsby, and then you will both be older and perhaps know your own minds better."

"That's a year, you know."

"A year is not so very long—at your time of life."

By which latter remark Lady Stavely did not show her knowledge of human nature.

"And I suppose I had better go now?" said Peregrine sheepishly.

"If you like to go into the drawing-room, I'm sure they will all be very glad to see you."

But Peregrine declared that he would not do this on any account. "You do not know, Lady Stavely, what a fool I should make of myself. It would be all over with me then."

"You should be more moderate in your feelings, Mr. Orme."

"It's all very well saying that; but you wouldn't be moderate if Noningsby were on fire, or if you thought the judge was going to die."

"Good gracious, Mr. Orme!"

"It's the same sort of thing to me, I can tell you. A man can't be moderate when he feels that he should like to break his own neck. I declare I almost tried to do it to-day."

"Oh, Mr. Orme!"

"Well; I did. But don't suppose I say that as a sort of threat. I'm safe enough to live for the next sixty years. It's only the happy people and those that are some good in the world that die. Good-bye, Lady Stavely. I'll come back next Christmas;—that is if it isn't all settled before then; but I know it will be no good." Then he got on his horse and rode very slowly home, along the high road to The Cleeve.

Lady Stavely did not go in among the other ladies till luncheon was announced, and when she did so, she said no word about her visitor. Nevertheless it was known by them all that Peregrine Orme had been there. "Ah, that's Mr. Orme's roan-coloured horse,"

Sophia Furnival had said, getting up and thrusting her face close to the drawing-room window. It was barely possible to see a portion of the road from the drawing-room, but Sophia's eyes had been sharp enough to see that portion.

"A groom has probably come over with a note," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Very likely," said Sophia. But they all knew from her voice that the rider was no groom, and that she did not intend it to be thought that he was a groom. Madeline said not a word, and kept her countenance marvellously; but she knew well enough that Peregrine had been with her mother; and guessed also why he had been there.

Madeline had asked herself some serious questions, and had answered them also, since that conversation which she had had with her father. He had assured her that he desired only her happiness; and though in so saying he had spoken nothing of marriage, she had well understood that he had referred to her future happiness—at that time when by her own choice she should be leaving her father's house. And now she asked herself boldly in what way might that happiness be best secured. Hitherto she had refrained from any such home questions. Latterly, within the last week or two, ideas of what love meant had forced themselves upon her mind. How could it have been otherwise? But she had never dared to tell herself either that she did love, or that she did not. Mr. Orme had come to her with his offer, plainly asking her for the gift of her heart, and she had immediately been aware that any such gift on her part was impossible—any such gift in his favour. She had known without a moment's thought that there was no room for hesitation. Had he

asked her to take wings and fly away with him over the woods the feat would not have been to her more impossible than that of loving him as his wife. Yet she liked him—liked him much in these latter days, because he had been so good to Felix Graham. When she felt that she liked him as she refused him, she felt also that it was for this reason that she liked him. On the day of Graham's accident she thought nothing of him—had hardly spoken to him. But now she loved him—with a sort of love, because he had been so good to Graham. Though in her heart she knew all this, she asked herself no questions till her father had spoken to her of her future happiness.

Then, as she wandered about the house alone,—for she still went on wandering,—she did ask herself a question or two. What was it that had changed her thus, and made her gay quick step so slow? what had altered the happy silver tone of her voice? what had created that load within her which seemed to weigh her down during every hour of the day? She knew that there had been a change; that she was not as she had been; and now she asked herself the question. Not on the first asking nor on the second, did the answer come; not perhaps on the twentieth. But the answer did come at last, and she told herself that her heart was no longer her own. She knew and acknowledged to herself that Felix Graham was its master and owner.

And then came the second question. Under those circumstances what had she better do? Her mother had told her,—and the words had fallen deep into her ears,—that it would be a great misfortune if she loved any man before she had reason to know that that man loved her. She had no such knowledge as regarded

Felix Graham. A suspicion that it might be so she did feel,—a suspicion which would grow into a hope let her struggle against it as she might. Baker, that injudicious Baker, had dropped in her hearing a word or two, which assisted this suspicion. And then the open frank question put to her by her father when he demanded whether Graham had addressed her as a lover, had tended towards the same result. What had she better do? Of one thing she now felt perfectly certain. Let the world go as it might in other respects, she could never leave her father's house as a bride unless the bridegroom were Felix Graham. A marriage with him might probably be impracticable, but any other marriage would be absolutely impossible. If her father or her mother told her not to think of Felix Graham, as a matter of course she would obey them; but not even in obedience to father or mother could she say that she loved any one else.

And now, all these matters having been considered, what should she do? Her father had invited her to tell everything to him, and she was possessed by a feeling that in this matter she might possibly find more indulgence with her father than with her mother; but yet it was more natural that her mother should be her confidante and adviser. She could speak to her mother, also, with a better courage, even though she felt less certain of sympathy. Peregrine Orme had now been there again, and had been closeted with Lady Staveley. On that ground she would speak, and having so resolved she lost no time in carrying out her purpose

“Mamma, Mr. Orme was here to-day: was he not?”

“Yes, my love.” Lady Staveley was sorry rather than otherwise that her daughter had asked her, but

would have been puzzled to explain why such should have been the case.

"I thought so," said Madeline.

"He rode over, and told me among other things that the match between his grandfather and Lady Mason is at an end. I was very glad to hear it, for I thought that Sir Peregrine was going to do a very foolish thing." And then there were a few further remarks on that subject, made probably by Lady Staveley with some undefined intention of inducing her daughter to think that Peregrine Orme had come over chiefly on that matter.

"But, mamma——"

"Well, my love."

"Did he say anything about—about what he was speaking to me about?"

"Well, Madeline, he did. He did say something on that subject but I had not intended to tell you unless you had asked."

"I hope, mamma, he understands that what he wants can never happen;—that is if he does want it now?"

"He does want it certainly, my dear."

"Then I hope you told him that it can never be? I hope you did, mamma!"

"But why should you be so certain about it, my love? He does not intend to trouble you with his suit,—nor do I. Why not leave that to time? There can be no reason why you should not see him again on a friendly footing when this embarrassment between you shall have passed away."

"There would be no reason, mamma, if he were quite sure that there could never be any other footing."

"Never is a very long word."

"But it is the only true word, mamma. It would be wrong in you, it would indeed, if you were to tell him to come again. I like Mr. Orme very much as a friend, and I should be very glad to know him,—that is if he chose to know me." And Madeline as she made this little proviso was thinking what her own worldly position might be as the wife of Felix Graham. "But as it is quite impossible that he and I should ever be anything else to each other he should not be asked to come here with any other intention."

"But Madeline, I do not see that it is so impossible."

"Mamma, it is impossible; quite impossible!" To this assertion Lady Staveley made no answer in words, but there was that in her countenance which made her daughter understand that she did not quite agree in this assertion, or understand this impossibility.

"Mamma, it is quite, quite impossible!" Madeline repeated.

"But why so?" said Lady Staveley, frightened by her daughter's manner, and almost fearing that something further was to come which had by far better be left unsaid.

"Because, mamma, I have no love to give him. Oh, mamma, do not be angry with me; do not push me away. You know who it is that I love. You knew it before." And then she threw herself on her knees, and hid her face on her mother's lap.

Lady Staveley had known it, but up to that moment she had hoped that that knowledge might have remained hidden as though it were unknown.

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS. FURNIVAL'S JOURNEY TO HAMWORTH

WHEN Peregrine got back to The Cleeve he learned that there was a lady with his mother. He had by this time partially succeeded in reasoning himself out of his despondency. He had learned at any rate that his proposition to marry into the Staveley family had been regarded with favour by all that family except the one whose views on that subject were by far the most important to him; and he had learned, as he thought, that Lady Staveley had no suspicion that her daughter's heart was preoccupied. But in this respect Lady Staveley had been too cunning for him. "Wait!" he said to himself as he went slowly along the road. "It's all very well to say wait, but there are some things which won't bear waiting for. A man who waits never gets well away with the hounds." Nevertheless as he rode into the court-yard his hopes were somewhat higher than they had been when he rode out of it.

"A lady! what lady? You don't mean Lady Mason?"

No. The servant did not mean Lady Mason. It was an elderly stout lady who had come in a fly, and the elderly stout lady was now in the drawing-room with his mother. Lady Mason was still up stairs. We all know who was that elderly stout lady, and we must now go back and say a few words as to her journey from Orange Street to Hamworth.

On the preceding evening Mrs. Furnival had told

Martha Biggs what was her intention; or perhaps it would be more just to say that Martha Biggs had worked it out of her. Now that Mrs. Furnival had left the fashionable neighbourhood of Cavendish Square, and located herself in that eastern homely district to which Miss Biggs had been so long accustomed, Miss Biggs had been almost tyrannical. It was not that she was less attentive to her friend, or less willing to slave for her with a view to any possible or impossible result. But the friend of Mrs. Furnival's bosom could not help feeling her opportunity. Mrs. Furnival had now thrown herself very much upon her friend, and of course the friend now expected unlimited privileges;—as is always the case with friends in such a position. It is very well to have friends to lean upon, but it is not always well to lean upon one's friends.

"I will be with you before you start in the morning," said Martha.

"It will not be at all necessary," said Mrs. Furnival.

"Oh, but I shall indeed. And, Kitty, I should think nothing of going with you, if you would wish it. Indeed I think you should have a female friend alongside of you in such a trouble. You have only to say the word and I'll go in a minute."

Mrs. Furnival however did not say the word, and Miss Biggs was obliged to deny herself the pleasure of the journey. But true to her word she came in the morning in ample time to catch Mrs. Furnival before she started, and for half an hour poured out sweet counsel into her friend's ear. If one's friends would as a rule refrain from action, how much more strongly would real friendship flourish in the world!

"Now, Kitty, I do trust you will persist in seeing her."

"That's why I'm going there."

"Yes; but she might put you off it, if you're not firm. Of course she'll deny herself if you send in your name first. What I should do would be this;—to ask to be shown in to her and then follow the servant. When the happiness of a life is at stake—the happiness of two lives I may say, and perhaps the immortal welfare of one of them in another world,—one must not stand too much upon etiquette. You would never forgive yourself if you did. Your object is to save him and to shame her out of her vile conduct. To shame her and frighten her out of it if that be possible. Follow the servant in and don't give them a moment to think. That's my advice."

In answer to all this Mrs. Furnival did not say much, and what little she did say was neither in the affirmative nor in the negative. Martha knew that she was being ill-treated, but not on that account did she relax her friendly efforts. The time would soon come, if all things went well, when Mrs. Furnival would be driven by the loneliness of her position to open her heart in a truly loving and confidential manner. Miss Biggs hoped sincerely that her friend and her friend's husband might be brought together again;—perhaps by her own efforts: but she did not anticipate,—or perhaps desire any speedy termination of the present arrangements. It would be well that Mr. Furnival should be punished by a separation of some months. Then, when he had learned to know what it was to have a home without a "presiding genius," he might, if duly penitent and open in his confession, be forgiven. That was Miss Biggs's programme, and she thought it probable that Mrs. Furnival might want a good deal of consolation before that day of open confession arrived.

"I shall go with you as far as the station, Kitty," she said in a very decided voice.

"It will not be at all necessary," Mrs. Furnival replied.

"Oh, but I shall. You must want support at such a moment as this, and as far as I can give it you shall have it."

"But it won't be any support to have you in the cab with me. If you will believe me, I had rather go alone. It is so necessary that I should think about all this."

But Martha would not believe her; and as for thinking, she was quite ready to take that part of the work herself. "Don't say another word," she said, as she thrust herself in at the cab-door after her friend. Mrs. Furnival hardly did say another word, but Martha Biggs said many. She knew that Mrs. Furnival was cross, ill pleased, and not disposed to confidence. But what of that? Her duty as a friend was not altered by Mrs. Furnival's ill humour. She would persevere, and having in her hands so great an opportunity, did not despair but what the time might come when both Mr. and Mrs. Furnival would with united voices hail her as their preserver. Poor Martha Biggs! She did not mean amiss, but she was troublesome.

It was very necessary that Mrs. Furnival should think over the step which she was taking. What was it that she intended to do when she arrived at Hamworth? That plan of forcing her way into Lady Mason's house did not recommend itself to her the more in that it was recommended by Martha Biggs.

"I suppose you will come up to us this evening?" Martha said, when she left her friend in the railway carriage. "Not this evening, I think. I shall be so

tired," Mrs. Furnival had replied. "Then I shall come down to you," said Martha, almost holloaing after her friend, as the train started. Mr. Furnival would not have been displeased had he known the state of his wife's mind at that moment towards her late visitor. During the whole of her journey down to Hamworth she tried to think what she would say to Lady Mason, but instead of so thinking her mind would revert to the unpleasantness of Miss Biggs's friendship.

When she left the train at the Hamworth station she was solicited by the driver of a public vehicle to use his fly, and having ascertained from the man that he well knew the position of Orley Farm, she got into the carriage and had herself driven to the residence of her hated rival. She had often heard of Orley Farm, but she had never as yet seen it, and now felt considerable anxiety both as regards the house and its occupant.

"This is Orley Farm, Ma'am," said the man, stopping at the gate. "Shall I drive up?"

But at this moment the gate was opened by a decent, respectable woman,—Mrs. Furnival would not quite have called her a lady,—who looked hard at the fly as it turned on to the private road.

"Perhaps this lady could tell me," said Mrs. Furnival, putting out her hand. "Is this where Lady Mason lives?"

The woman was Mrs. Dockwrath. On that day Samuel Dockwrath had gone to London, but before starting he had made known to his wife with fiendish glee that it had been at last decided by all the persons concerned that Lady Mason should be charged with perjury, and tried for that offence.

"You don't mean to say that the judges have said so?" asked poor Miriam.

"I do mean to say that all the judges in England could not save her from having to stand her trial, and it is my belief that all the lawyers in the land cannot save her from conviction. I wonder whether she ever thinks now of those fields which she took away from me!"

Then, when her master's back was turned, she put on her bonnet and walked up to Orley Farm. She knew well that Lady Mason was at The Cleeve, and believed that she was about to become the wife of Sir Peregrine; but she knew also that Lucius was at home, and it might be well to let him know what was going on.

She had just seen Lucius Mason, when she was met by Mrs. Furnival's fly. She had seen Lucius Mason, and the angry manner in which he declared that he could in no way interfere in his mother's affairs had frightened her. "But, Mr. Lucius," she had said, "she ought to be doing something, you know. There is no believing how bitter Samuel is about it."

"He may be as bitter as he likes, Mrs. Dockwrath," young Mason had answered with considerable dignity in his manner. "It will not in the least affect my mother's interests. In the present instance, however, I am not her adviser." Whereupon Mrs. Dockwrath had retired, and as she was afraid to go to Lady Mason at The Cleeve, she was about to return home when she opened the gate for Mrs. Furnival. She then explained that Lady Mason was not at home and had not been at home for some weeks; that she was staying with her friends at The Cleeve, and that in order to get there Mrs. Furnival must go back through Hamworth and round by the high road.

"I knows the way well enough, Mrs. Dockwrath,"

said the driver. "I've been at The Cleeve before now, I guess."

So Mrs. Furnival was driven back to Hamworth, and on going over that piece of ground she resolved that she would follow Lady Mason to The Cleeve. Why should she be afraid of Sir Peregrine Orme or of all the Ormes? Why should she fear anyone while engaged in the performance of so sacred a duty? I must confess that in truth she was very much afraid, but nevertheless she had herself taken on to The Cleeve. When she arrived at the door, she asked of course for Lady Mason, but did not feel at all inclined to follow the servant uninvited into the house as recommended by Miss Biggs. Lady Mason, the man said, was not very well, and after a certain amount of parley at the door the matter ended in her being shown into the drawing-room, where she was soon joined by Mrs. Orme.

"I am Mrs. Furnival," she began, and then Mrs. Orme begged her to sit down. "I have come here to see Lady Mason—on some business—some business not of a very pleasant nature. I'm sure I don't know how to trouble you with it, and yet——" And then even Mrs. Orme could see that her visitor was somewhat confused.

"Is it about the trial?" asked Mrs. Orme.

"Then there is really a lawsuit going on?"

"A lawsuit!" said Mrs. Orme, rather puzzled.

"You said something about a trial. Now, Mrs. Orme, pray do not deceive me. I'm a very unhappy woman; I am indeed."

"Deceive you! Why should I deceive you?"

"No, indeed. Why should you? And now I look at you I do not think you will."

"Indeed I will not, Mrs. Furnival."

"And there is really a lawsuit then?" Mrs. Furnival persisted in asking.

"I thought you would know all about it," said Mrs. Orme, "as Mr. Furnival manages Lady Mason's law business. I thought that perhaps it was about that that you had come."

Then Mrs. Furnival explained that she knew nothing whatever about Lady Mason's affairs, that hitherto she had not believed that there was any trial or any lawsuit, and gradually explained the cause of all her trouble. She did not do this without sundry interruptions, caused both by her own feelings and by Mrs. Orme's exclamations. But at last it all came forth; and before she had done she was calling her husband Tom, and appealing to her listener for sympathy.

"But indeed it's a mistake, Mrs. Furnival. It is indeed. There are reasons which make me quite sure of it." So spoke Mrs. Orme. How could Lady Mason have been in love with Mr. Furnival,—if such a state of things could be possible under any circumstances,—seeing that she had been engaged to marry Sir Peregrine? Mrs. Orme did not declare her reasons, but repeated with very positive assurances her knowledge that Mrs. Furnival was labouring under some very grievous error.

"But why should she always be at his chambers? I have seen her there twice, Mrs. Orme. I have indeed;—with my own eyes."

Mrs. Orme would have thought nothing of it if Lady Mason had been seen there every day for a week together, and regarded Mrs. Furnival's suspicions as an hallucination bordering on insanity. A woman be in love with Mr. Furnival! A very pretty woman en-

deavour to entice away from his wife the affection of such a man as that! As these ideas passed through Mrs. Orme's mind she did not perhaps remember that Sir Peregrine, who was more than ten years Mr. Furnival's senior, had been engaged to marry the same lady. But then she herself loved Sir Peregrine dearly, and she had no such feeling with reference to Mr. Furnival. She however did what was most within her power to do to allay the suffering under which her visitor laboured, and explained to her the position in which Lady Mason was placed. "I do not think she can see you," she ended by saying, "for she is in very great trouble."

"To be tried for perjury!" said Mrs Furnival, out of whose heart all hatred towards Lady Mason was quickly departing. Had she heard that she was to be tried for murder,—that she had been convicted of murder,—it would have altogether softened her heart towards her supposed enemy. She could forgive her any offence but the one.

"Yes indeed," said Mrs. Orme, wiping a tear away from her eye as she thought of all the troubles present and to come. "It is the saddest thing. Poor lady! It would almost break your heart if you were to see her. Since first she heard of this, which was before Christmas, she has not had one quiet moment."

"Poor creature!" said Mrs. Furnival.

"Ah, you would say so, if you knew all. She has had to depend a great deal upon Mr. Furnival for advice, and without that I don't know what she would do."

This Mrs. Orme said, not wishing to revert to the charge against Lady Mason which had brought Mrs. Furnival down to Hamworth, but still desirous

of emancipating her poor friend completely from that charge. "And Sir Peregrine also is very kind to her, —very." This she added, feeling that up to that moment Mrs. Furnival could have heard nothing of the intended marriage, but thinking it probable that she must do so before long. "Indeed anybody would be kind to her who saw her in her suffering. I am sure you would, Mrs. Furnival."

"Dear, dear!" said Mrs. Furnival, who was beginning to entertain almost a kindly feeling towards Mrs. Orme.

"It is such a dreadful position for a lady. Sometimes I think that her mind will fail her before the day comes."

"But what a very wicked man that other Mr. Mason must be!" said Mrs. Furnival.

That was a view of the matter on which Mrs. Orme could not say much. She disliked that Mr. Mason as much as she could dislike a man whom she had never seen, but it was not open to her now to say that he was very wicked in this matter. "I suppose he thinks the property ought to belong to him," she answered.

"That was settled years ago," said Mrs. Furnival. "Horrid, cruel man! But after all I don't see why she should mind it so much."

"Oh, Mrs. Furnival!—to stand in a court and be tried."

"But if one is innocent! For my part, if I knew myself innocent I could brave them all. It is the feeling that one is wrong that cows one." And Mrs. Furnival thought of the little confession which she would be called upon to make at home.

And then feeling some difficulty as to her last words in such an interview, Mrs. Furnival got up to go.

"Perhaps, Mrs. Orme," she said, "I have been foolish in this."

"You have been mistaken, Mrs. Furnival. I am sure of that."

"I begin to think I have. But, Mrs. Orme, will you let me ask you a favour? Perhaps you will not say anything about my coming here. I have been very unhappy; I have indeed; and——" Mrs. Furnival's handkerchief was now up at her eyes, and Mrs. Orme's heart was again full of pity. Of course she gave the required promise; and, looking to the character of the woman, we may say that, of course, she kept it.

"Mrs. Furnival! What was she here about?" Peregrine asked of his mother.

"I would rather not tell you, Perry," said his mother, kissing him and then there were no more words spoken on the subject.

Mrs. Furnival as she made her journey back to London began to dislike Martha Biggs more and more, and most unjustly attributed to that lady in her thoughts the folly of this journey to Hamworth. The journey to Hamworth had been her own doing, and had the idea originated with Miss Biggs the journey would never have been made. As it was, while she was yet in the train, she came to the strong resolution of returning direct from the London station to her own house in Harley Street. It would be best to cut the knot at once, and thus by a bold stroke of the knife rid herself of the Orange Street rooms and Miss Biggs at the same time. She did drive to Harley Street, and on her arrival at her own door was informed by the astonished Spooner that, "Master was at home,—all alone in the dining-room. He was going to dine at home, and seemed very lonely like." There, as she stood in the

hall, there was nothing but the door between her and her husband, and she conceived that the sound of her arrival must have been heard by him. For a moment her courage was weak, and she thought of hurrying up stairs. Had she done so her trouble would still have been all before her. Some idea of this came upon her mind, and after a moment's pause, she opened the dining-room door and found herself in her husband's presence. He was sitting over the fire in his arm-chair, very gloomily, and had not heard the arrival. He too had some tenderness left in his heart, and this going away of his wife had distressed him.

"Tom," she said, going up to him, and speaking in a low voice, "I have come back again." And she stood before him as a suppliant.

CHAPTER XXV

SHOWING HOW THINGS WENT ON AT NONINGSBY

Yes, Lady Staveley had known it before. She had given a fairly correct guess at the state of her daughter's affections, though she had not perhaps acknowledged to herself the intensity of her daughter's feelings. But the fact might not have mattered if it had never been told. Madeline might have overcome this love for Mr. Graham, and all might have been well if she had never mentioned it. But now the mischief was done. She had acknowledged to her mother,—and, which was perhaps worse, she had acknowledged to herself,—that her heart was gone, and Lady Staveley saw no cure for the evil. Had this happened but a few hours earlier she would have spoken with much less encouragement to Peregrine Orme.

And Felix Graham was not only in the house, but was to remain there for yet a while longer, spending a very considerable portion of his time in the drawing-room. He was to come down on this very day at three o'clock after an early dinner, and on the next day he was to be promoted to the dining-room. As a son-in-law he was quite ineligible. He had, as Lady Staveley understood, no private fortune, and he belonged to a profession which he would not follow in the only way by which it was possible to earn an income by it. Such being the case, her daughter, whom of all girls she knew to be the most retiring, the least likely to speak of such feelings unless driven to it by great stress,—her daughter had positively declared to her

that she was in love with this man! Could anything be more hopeless? Could any position be more trying?

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" she said, almost wringing her hands in her vexation,—“No, my darling, I am not angry,” and she kissed her child and smoothed her hair. “I am not angry; but I must say I think it very unfortunate. He has not a shilling in the world.”

“I will do nothing that you and papa do not approve,” said Madeline, holding down her head.

“And then you know he doesn't think of such a thing himself—of course he does not. Indeed, I don't think he's a marrying man at all.”

“Oh, mamma, do not talk in that way;—as if I expected anything I could not but tell you the truth when you spoke of Mr. Orme as you did.”

“Poor Mr. Orme! he is such an excellent young man.”

“I don't suppose he's better than Mr. Graham, mamma, if you speak of goodness.”

“I'm sure I don't know,” said Lady Staveley, very much put beside herself. “I wish there were no such things as young men at all. There's Augustus making a fool of himself.” And she walked twice the length of the room in an agony of maternal anxiety. Peregrine Orme had suggested to her what she would feel if Noningsby were on fire; but could any such fire be worse than these pernicious love flames? He had also suggested another calamity, and as Lady Staveley remembered that, she acknowledged to herself that the Fates were not so cruel to her as they might have been. So she kissed her daughter, again assured her that she was by no means angry with her, and then they parted.

This trouble had now come to such a head that no course was any longer open to poor Lady Staveley, but

that one which she had adopted in all the troubles of her married life. She would tell the judge everything, and throw all the responsibility upon his back. Let him decide whether a cold shoulder or a paternal blessing should be administered to the ugly young man up stairs, who had tumbled off his horse the first day he went out hunting, and who would not earn his bread as others did, but thought himself cleverer than all the world. The feelings in Lady Staveley's breast towards Mr. Graham at this especial time were not of a kindly nature. She could not make comparisons between him and Peregrine Orme without wondering at her daughter's choice. Peregrine was fair and handsome, one of the curled darlings of the nation, bright of eye and smooth of skin, good-natured, of a sweet disposition, a young man to be loved by all the world, and—incidentally—the heir to a baronetcy and a good estate. All his people were nice, and he lived close in the neighbourhood! Had Lady Staveley been set to choose a husband for her daughter she could have chosen none better. And then she counted up Felix Graham. His eyes no doubt were bright enough, but taken altogether he was,—at least so she said to herself—hideously ugly. He was by no means a curled darling. And then he was masterful in mind, and not soft and pleasant as was young Orme. He was heir to nothing, and as to people of his own he had none in particular. Who could say where he must live? As likely as not in Patagonia, having been forced to accept a judgeship in that new colony for the sake of bread. But her daughter should not go to Patagonia with him if she could help it! So when the judge came home that evening, she told him all before she would allow him to dress for dinner.

"He certainly is not very handsome," the judge said, when Lady Staveley insisted somewhat strongly on that special feature of the case.

"I think he is the ugliest young man I know," said her ladyship.

"He looks very well in his wig," said the judge.

"Wig! Madeline would not see him in his wig; nor anybody else very often, seeing the way he is going on about his profession. What are we to do about it?"

"Well. I should say, do nothing."

"And let him propose to the dear girl if he chooses to take the fancy into his head?"

"I don't see how we are to hinder him. But I have that impression of Mr. Graham that I do not think he will do anything unhandsome by us. He has some singular ideas of his own about law, and I grant you that he is plain——"

"The plainest young man I ever saw," said Lady Staveley.

"But if I know him, he is a man of high character and much more than ordinary acquirement."

"I cannot understand Madeline," Lady Staveley went on, not caring overmuch about Felix Graham's acquirements.

"Well, my dear, I think the key to her choice is this, that she has judged not with her eyes, but with her ears, or rather with her understanding. Had she accepted Mr. Orme, I as a father should of course have been well satisfied. He is, I have no doubt, a fine young fellow, and will make a good husband some day."

"Oh, excellent!" said her ladyship; "and The Cleeve is only seven miles."

"But I must acknowledge that I cannot feel angry with Madeline."

"Angry! no, not angry. Who would be angry with the poor child?"

"Indeed I am somewhat proud of her. It seems to me that she prefers mind to matter, which is a great deal to say for a young lady."

"Matter!" exclaimed Lady Staveley; who could not but feel that the term, as applied to such a young man as Peregrine Orme, was very opprobrious.

"Wit and intellect and power of expression have gone further with her than good looks and rank and worldly prosperity. If that be so, and I believe it is, I cannot but love her the better for it."

"So do I love her, as much as any mother can love her daughter."

"Of course you do." And the judge kissed his wife.

"And I like wit and genius and all that sort of thing."

"Otherwise you would not have taken me, my dear."

"You were the handsomest man of your day. That's why I fell in love with you."

"The compliment is a very poor one," said the judge.

"Never mind that. I like wit and genius too; but wit and genius are none the better for being ugly; and wit and genius should know how to butter their own bread before they think of taking a wife."

"You forget, my dear, that for aught we know, wit and genius may be perfectly free from any such thought." And then the judge made it understood that if he were left to himself he would dress for dinner.

When the ladies left the parlour that evening they found Graham in the drawing-room, but there was no longer any necessity for embarrassment on Madeline's

part at meeting him. They had been in the room together on three or four occasions, and therefore she could give him her hand, and ask after his arm without feeling that every one was watching her. But she hardly spoke to him beyond this, nor indeed did she speak much to anybody. The conversation, till the gentlemen joined them, was chiefly kept up by Sophia Furnival and Mrs. Arbuthnot, and even after that the evening did not pass very briskly.

One little scene there was, during which poor Lady Staveley's eyes were anxiously fixed upon her son, though most of those in the room supposed that she was sleeping. Miss Furnival was to return to London on the following day, and it therefore behoved Augustus to be very sad. In truth he had been rather given to a melancholy humour during the last day or two. Had Miss Furnival accepted all his civil speeches, making him answers equally civil, the matter might very probably have passed by without giving special trouble to any one. But she had not done this, and therefore Augustus Staveley had fancied himself to be really in love with her. What the lady's intentions were I will not pretend to say; but if she was in truth desirous of becoming Mrs. Staveley, she certainly went about her business in a discreet and wise manner.

"So you leave us to-morrow, immediately after breakfast," said he, having dressed his face with that romantic sobriety which he had been practising for the last three days.

"I am sorry to say that such is the fact," said Sophia.

"To tell you the truth I am not sorry," said Augustus; and he turned away his face for a moment, giving a long sigh.

"I dare say not, Mr. Staveley; but you need not have said so to me," said Sophia, pretending to take him literally at his word.

"Because I cannot stand this kind of thing any longer. I suppose I must not see you in the morning,—alone?"

"Well, I suppose not. If I can get down to prayers after having all my things packed up, it will be as much as I can do."

"And if I begged for half an hour as a last kindness——"

"I certainly should not grant it. Go and ask your mother whether such a request would be reasonable."

"Psha!"

"Ah, but it's not psha! Half-hours between young ladies and young gentlemen before breakfast are very serious things."

"And I mean to be serious," said Augustus.

"But I don't," said Sophia.

"I am to understand then that under no possible circumstances——"

"Bless me, Mr. Staveley, how solemn you are."

"There are occasions in a man's life when he is bound to be solemn. You are going away from us, Miss Furnival——"

"One would think I was going to Jeddo, whereas I am going to Harley Street."

"And I may come and see you there!"

"Of course you may if you like it. According to the usages of the world you would be reckoned very uncivil if you did not. For myself I do not much care about such usages, and therefore if you omit it I will forgive you."

"Very well; then I will say good-night,—and good-bye." These last words he uttered in a strain which should have melted her heart, and as he took leave of her he squeezed her hand with an affection that was almost painful.

It may be remarked that if Augustus Staveley was quite in earnest with Sophia Furnival, he would have asked her that all important question in a straightforward manner as Peregrine Orme had asked it of Madeline. Perhaps Miss Furnival was aware of this, and being so aware, considered that a serious half-hour before breakfast might not as yet be safe. If he were really in love he would find his way to Harley Street. On the whole I am inclined to think that Miss Furnival did understand her business.

On the following morning Miss Furnival went her way without any further scenes of tenderness, and Lady Staveley was thoroughly glad that she was gone. "A nasty sly thing," she said to Baker. "Sly enough, my lady," said Baker; "but our Mr. Augustus will be one too many for her. Deary me, to think of her having the imperance to think of him." In all which Miss Furnival was I think somewhat ill used. If young gentlemen such as Augustus Staveley are allowed to amuse themselves with young ladies, surely young ladies such as Miss Furnival should be allowed to play their own cards accordingly.

On that day, early in the morning, Felix Graham sought and obtained an interview with his host in the judge's own study. "I have come about two things," he said, taking the easy chair to which he was invited.

"Two or ten, I shall be very happy," said the judge cheerily.

"I will take business first," said Graham.

"And then pleasure will be the sweeter afterwards," said the judge.

"I have been thinking a great deal about this case of Lady Mason's, and I have read all the papers, old and new, which Mr. Furnival has sent me. I cannot bring myself to suppose it possible that she can have been guilty of any fraud or deception."

"I believe her to be free from all guilt in the matter—as I told you before. But then of course you will take that as a private opinion, not as one legally formed. I have never gone into the matter as you have done."

"I confess that I do not like having dealings with Mr. Chaffanbrass and Mr. Aram."

"Mr. Chaffanbrass and Mr. Aram may not be so bad as you, perhaps in ignorance, suppose them to be. Does it not occur to you that we should be very badly off without such men as Chaffanbrass and Aram?"

"So we should without chimney-sweepers and scavengers."

"Graham, my dear fellow, judge not that you be not judged. I am older than you, and have seen more of these men. Believe me that as you grow older and also see more of them, your opinion will be more lenient,—and more just. Do not be angry with me for taking this liberty with you."

"My dear judge, if you knew how I value it!—how I should value any mark of such kindness that you can show me! However, I have decided that I will know something more of these gentlemen at once. If I have your approbation I will let Mr. Furnival know that I will undertake the case."

The judge signified his approbation, and thus the

first of those two matters was soon settled between them.

"And now for the pleasure," said the judge.

"I don't know much about pleasure," said Graham, fidgeting in his chair, rather uneasily. "I'm afraid there is not much pleasure for either of us, or for anybody else, in what I'm going to say."

"Then there is so much more reason for having it said quickly. Unpleasant things should always be got over without delay."

"Nothing on earth can exceed Lady Staveley's kindness to me and yours, and that of the whole family since my unfortunate accident."

"Don't think of it. It has been nothing. We like you, but we should have done as much as that even if we had not."

"And now I'm going to tell you that I have fallen in love with your daughter Madeline." As the judge wished to have the tale told quickly, I think he had reason to be satisfied with the very succinct terms used by Felix Graham.

"Indeed!" said the judge.

"And that was the reason why I wished to go away at the earliest possible time—and still wish it."

"You are right there, Mr Graham. I must say you are right there. Under all the circumstances of the case I think you were right to wish to leave us."

"And therefore I shall go the first thing to-morrow morning"—in saying which last words poor Felix could not refrain from showing a certain unevenness of temper, and some disappointment.

"Gently, gently, Mr. Graham. Let us have a few more words before we accede to the necessity of any-

thing so sudden. Have you spoken to Madeline on this subject?"

"Not a word."

"And I may presume that you do not intend to do so."

For a moment or so Felix Graham sat without speaking, and then, getting up from his chair, he walked twice the length of the room. "Upon my word, judge, I will not answer for myself if I remain here," he said at last.

A softer-hearted man than Judge Staveley, or one who could make himself more happy in making others happy, never sat on the English bench. Was not this a gallant young fellow before him,—gallant and clever, of good honest principles, and a true manly heart? Was he not a gentleman by birth, education, and tastes? What more should a man want for a son-in-law? And then his daughter had had the wit to love this man so endowed. It was almost on his tongue to tell Graham that he might go and seek the girl and plead his own cause to her.

But bread is bread, and butchers' bills are bills! The man and the father, and the successful possessor of some thousands a year, was too strong at last for the soft-hearted philanthropist. Therefore, having collected his thoughts, he thus expressed himself upon the occasion:—

"Mr. Graham, I think you have behaved very well in this matter, and it is exactly what I should have expected from you." The judge at the time knew nothing about Mary Snow. "As regards yourself personally I should be proud to own you as my son-in-law, but I am of course bound to regard the welfare of my daughter. Your means I fear are but small."

"Very small indeed," said Graham.

"And though you have all those gifts which should bring you on in your profession, you have learned to entertain ideas, which hitherto have barred you from success. Now I tell you what you shall do. Remain here two or three days longer, till you are fit to travel, and abstain from saying anything to my daughter. Come to me again in three months, if you still hold the same in mind, and I will pledge myself to tell you then whether or no you have my leave to address my child as a suitor."

Felix Graham silently took the judge's hand, feeling that a strong hope had been given to him, and so the interview was ended.

CHAPTER XXVI

LADY MASON RETURNS HOME

LADY MASON remained at The Cleeve for something more than a week after that day on which she made her confession, during which time she was fully committed to take her trial at the next assizes at Alston on an indictment for perjury. This was done in a manner that astonished even herself by the absence of all publicity or outward scandal. The matter was arranged between Mr. Matthew Round and Mr. Solomon Aram, and was so arranged in accordance with Mr. Furnival's wishes. Mr. Furnival wrote to say that at such a time he would call at The Cleeve with a post-chaise. This he did, and took Lady Mason with him before two magistrates for the county who were sitting at Doddinghurst, a village five miles distant from Sir Peregrine's house. Here by agreement they were met by Lucius Mason, who was to act as one of the bailsmen for his mother's appearance at the trial. Sir Peregrine was the other, but it was brought about by amicable management between the lawyers that his appearance before the magistrates was not required. There were also there the two attorneys, Bridget Bolster the witness, one Torrington from London, who brought with him the absolute deed executed on that 14th of July with reference to the then dissolved partnership of Mason and Martock; and there was Mr. Samuel Dockwrath. I must not forget to say that there was also a reporter for the press,

provided by the special care of the latter-named gentleman.

The arrival in the village of four different vehicles, and the sight of such gentlemen as Mr. Furnival, Mr. Round, and Mr. Aram, of course aroused some excitement there; but this feeling was kept down as much as possible, and Lady Mason was very quickly allowed to return to the carriage. Mr. Dockwrath made one or two attempts to get up a scene, and to rouse a feeling of public anger against the lady who was to be tried; but the magistrates put him down. They also seemed to be fully impressed with a sense of Lady Mason's innocence in the teeth of the evidence which was given against her. This was the general feeling in the minds of all people,—except of those who knew most about it. There was an idea that affairs had so been managed by Mr. Joseph Mason and Mr. Dockwrath that another trial was necessary, but that the unfortunate victim of Mr. Mason's cupidity and Mr. Dockwrath's malice would be washed white as snow when the day of that trial came. The chief performers on the present occasion were Round and Aram, and a stranger to such proceedings would have said that they were acting in concert. Mr. Round pressed for the indictment, and brought forward in a very short way the evidence of Bolster and Torrington. Mr. Aram said that his client was advised to reserve her defence, and was prepared with bail to any amount. Mr. Round advised the magistrates that reasonable bail should be taken, and then the matter was settled. Mr. Furnival sat on a chair close to the elder of those two gentlemen, and whispered a word to him now and then. Lady Mason was provided with an arm-chair close to Mr. Furnival's right hand, and close to her right hand

stood her son. Her face was covered by a deep veil, and she was not called upon during the whole proceeding to utter one audible word. A single question was put to her by the presiding magistrate before the committal was signed, and it was understood that some answer was made to it; but this answer reached the ears of those in the room by means of Mr. Furnival's voice.

It was observed by most of those there that during the whole of the sitting Lady Mason held her son's hand; but it was observed also that though Lucius permitted this he did not seem to return the pressure. He stood there during the entire proceedings without motion or speech, looking very stern. He signed the bail-bond, but even that he did without saying a word. Mr. Dockwrath demanded that Lady Mason should be kept in custody till the bond should also have been signed by Sir Peregrine; but upon this Mr. Round remarked that he believed Mr. Joseph Mason had intrusted to him the conduct of the case, and the elder magistrate desired Mr. Dockwrath to abstain from further interference. "All right," said he to a person standing close to him. "But I'll be too many for them yet, as you will see when she is brought before a judge and jury." And then Lady Mason stood committed to take her trial at the next Alston assizes.

When Lucius had come forward to hand her from the post-chaise in which she arrived Lady Mason had kissed him, but this was all the intercourse that then passed between the mother and son. Mr. Furnival, however, informed him that his mother would return to Orley Farm on the next day but one.

"She thinks it better that she should be at home from this time to the day of the trial," said Mr. Fur-

nival; "and on the whole Sir Peregrine is inclined to agree with her."

"I have thought so all through," said Lucius.

"But you are to understand that there is no disagreement between your mother and the family at The Cleeve. The idea of the marriage has, I think very properly, been laid aside."

"Of course it was proper that it should be laid aside."

"Yes; but I must beg you to understand that there has been no quarrel. Indeed you will, I have no doubt, perceive that, as Mrs. Orme has assured me that she will see your mother constantly till the time comes."

"She is very kind," said Lucius. But it was evident from the tone of his voice that he would have preferred that all the Ormes should have remained away. In his mind this time of suffering to his mother and to him was a period of trial and probation,—a period, if not of actual disgrace, yet of disgrace before the world; and he thought that it would have best become his mother to have abstained from all friendship out of her own family, and even from all expressed sympathy, till she had indicated her own purity and innocence. And as he thought of this he declared to himself that he would have sacrificed everything to her comfort and assistance if she would only have permitted it. He would have loved her, and been tender to her, receiving on his own shoulders all those blows which now fell so hardly upon hers. Every word should have been a word of kindness; every look should have been soft and full of affection. He would have treated her not only with all the love which a son could show to a mother, but with all the respect and sympathy which a gentleman could feel for a lady in

distress. But then, in order that such a state of things as this should have existed, it would have been necessary that she should have trusted him. She should have leaned upon him, and,—though he did not exactly say so in talking over the matter with himself, still he thought it,—on him and on him only. But she had declined to lean upon him at all. She had gone away to strangers,—she, who should hardly have spoken to a stranger during these sad months! She would not have his care; and under those circumstances he could only stand aloof, hold up his head, and look sternly. As for her innocence, that was a matter of course. He knew that she was innocent. He wanted no one to tell him that his own mother was not a thief, a forger, a castaway among the world's worst wretches. He thanked no one for such an assurance. Every honest man must sympathise with a woman so injured. It would be a necessity of his manhood and of his honesty! But he would have valued most a sympathy which would have abstained from all expression till after that trial should be over. It should have been for him to act and for him to speak during this terrible period. But his mother who was a free agent had willed it otherwise.

And there had been one other scene. Mr. Furnival had introduced Lady Mason to Mr. Solomon Aram, having explained to her that it would be indispensable that Mr. Aram should see her, probably once or twice before the trial came on.

"But cannot it be done through you?" said Lady Mason. "Though of course I should not expect that you can so sacrifice your valuable time."

"Pray believe me that that is not the consideration," said Mr. Furnival. "We have engaged the services

of Mr. Aram because he is supposed to understand difficulties of this sort better than any other man in the profession, and his chance of rescuing you from this trouble will be much better if you can bring yourself to have confidence in him—full confidence.” And Mr. Furnival looked into her face as he spoke with an expression of countenance that was very eloquent. “You must not suppose that I shall not do all in my power. In my proper capacity I shall be acting for you with all the energy that I can use; but the case has now assumed an aspect which requires that it should be in an attorney’s hands.” And then Mr. Furnival introduced her to Mr. Solomon Aram.

Mr. Solomon Aram was not, in outward appearance, such a man as Lady Mason, Sir Peregrine Orme, or others quite ignorant in such matters would have expected. He was not a dirty old Jew with a hooked nose and an imperfect pronunciation of English consonants. Mr. Chaffanbrass, the barrister, bore more resemblance to a Jew of that ancient type. Mr. Solomon Aram was a good-looking man about forty, perhaps rather over-dressed, but bearing about him no other sign of vulgarity. Nor at first sight would it probably have been discerned that he was of the Hebrew persuasion. He had black hair and a well-formed face; but his eyes were closer than is common with most of us, and his nose seemed to be somewhat swollen about the bridge. When one knew that he was a Jew one saw that he was a Jew; but in the absence of such previous knowledge he might have been taken for as good a Christian as any other attorney.

Mr. Aram raised his hat and bowed as Mr. Furnival performed the ceremony of introduction. This was

done while she was still seated in the carriage, and as Lucius was waiting at the door to hand her down into the house where the magistrates were sitting. "I am delighted to have the honour of making your acquaintance," said Mr. Aram.

Lady Mason essayed to mutter some word; but no word was audible, nor was any necessary. "I have no doubt," continued the attorney, "that we shall pull through this little difficulty without any ultimate damage whatsoever. In the mean time it is of course disagreeable to a lady of your distinction." And then he made another bow. "We are peculiarly happy in having such a tower of strength as Mr. Furnival," and then he bowed to the barrister. "And my old friend Mr. Chaffanbrass is another tower of strength. Eh, Mr. Furnival?" And so the introduction was over.

Lady Mason had quite understood Mr. Furnival;—had understood both his words and his face, when he told her how indispensable it was that she should have full confidence in this attorney. He had meant that she should tell him all. She must bring herself to confess everything to this absolute stranger. And then—for the first time—she felt sure that Mr. Furnival had guessed her secret. He also knew it, but it would not suit him that any one should know that he knew it! Alas, alas! would it not be better that all the world should know it and that there might be an end? Had not her doom been told to her? Even if the paraphernalia of justice,—the judge and the jury, and the lawyers, could be induced to declare her innocent before all men, must she not confess her guilt to him,—to that one,—for whose verdict alone she cared? If he knew her to be guilty what matter who might think her innocent? And she had been told that all must

be declared to him. That property was his,—but his only through her guilt; and that property must be restored to its owner! So much Sir Peregrine Orme had declared to be indispensable,—Sir Peregrine Orme, who in other matters concerning this case was now dark enough in his judgment. On that point, however, there need be no darkness. Though the heaven should fall on her devoted head, that tardy justice must be done!

When this piece of business had been completed at Doddington, Lady Mason returned to The Cleeve, whither Mr. Furnival accompanied her. He had offered his seat in the post-chaise to Lucius, but the young man had declared that he was unwilling to go to The Cleeve, and consequently there was no opportunity for conversation between Lady Mason and her son. On her arrival she went at once to her room, and there she continued to live as she had done for the last few days till the morning of her departure came. To Mrs. Orme she told all that had occurred, as Mr. Furnival did also to Sir Peregrine. On that occasion Sir Peregrine said very little to the barrister, merely bowing his head courteously as each different point was explained, in intimation of his having heard and understood what was said to him. Mr. Furnival could not but see that his manner was entirely altered. There was no enthusiasm now; no violence of invective against that wretch at Groby Park; no positive assurance that his guest's innocence must come out at the trial bright as the day! He showed no inclination to desert Lady Mason's cause, and indeed insisted on hearing the particulars of all that had been done; but he said very little, and those few words adverted to the terrible sadness of the subject. He seemed too to

be older than he had been, and less firm in his gait. That terrible sadness had already told greatly upon him. Those about him had observed that he had not once crossed the threshold of his hall door since the morning on which Lady Mason had taken to her own room.

"He has altered his mind," said the lawyer to himself as he was driven back to the Hamworth station. "He also now believes her to be guilty." As to his own belief, Mr. Furnival held no argument within his own breast, but we may say that he was no longer perplexed by much doubt upon the matter.

And then the morning came for Lady Mason's departure. Sir Peregrine had not seen her since she had left him in the library after her confession, although, as may be remembered, he had undertaken to do so. But he had not then known how Mrs. Orme might act when she heard the story. As matters had turned out Mrs. Orme had taken upon herself the care of their guest, and all intercourse between Lady Mason and Sir Peregrine had passed through his daughter-in-law. But now, on this morning, he declared that he would go to her up stairs in Mrs. Orme's room, and himself hand her down through the hall into the carriage. Against this Lady Mason had expostulated, but in vain.

"It will be better so, dear," Mrs. Orme had said. "It will teach the servants and people to think that he still respects and esteems you."

"But he does not!" said she, speaking almost sharply. "How would it be possible? Ah, me—respect and esteem are gone from me for ever!"

"No, not for ever," replied Mrs. Orme. "You have much to bear, but no evil lasts for ever."

“Will not sin last for ever?—sin such as mine?”

“Not if you repent;—repent and make such restitution as is possible. Lady Mason, say that you have repented. Tell me that you have asked Him to pardon you!” And then, as had been so often the case during these last days, Lady Mason sat silent, with hard, fixed eyes, with her hands clasped, and her lips compressed. Never as yet had Mrs Orme induced her to say that she had asked for pardon at the cost of telling her son that the property which he called his own had been procured for him by his mother’s fraud. That punishment, and that only, was too heavy for her neck to bear. Her acquittal in the law court would be as nothing to her if it must be followed by an avowal of her guilt to her own son!

Sir Peregrine did come up stairs and handed her down through the hall as he had proposed. When he came into the room she did not look at him, but stood leaning against the table, with her eyes fixed upon the ground.

“I hope you find yourself better,” he said, as he put out his hand to her. She did not even attempt to make a reply, but allowed him just to touch her fingers.

“Perhaps I had better not come down,” said Mrs. Orme. “It will be easier to say good-bye here.”

“Good-bye,” said Lady Mason, and her voice sounded in Sir Peregrine’s ears like a voice from the dead.

“God bless you and preserve you,” said Mrs. Orme, “and restore you to your son. God will bless you if you will ask Him. No; you shall not go without a kiss.” And she put out her arms that Lady Mason might come to her.

The poor broken wretch stood for a moment as

though trying to determine what she would do; and then, almost with a shriek, she threw herself on to the bosom of the other woman, and burst into a flood of tears. She had intended to abstain from that embrace; she had resolved that she would do so, declaring to herself that she was not fit to be held against that pure heart; but the tenderness of the offer had overcome her, and now she pressed her friend convulsively in her arms, as though there might yet be comfort for her as long as she could remain close to one who was so good to her.

"I shall come and see you very often," said Mrs. Orme, — "almost daily."

"No, no, no," exclaimed the other, hardly knowing the meaning of her own words.

"But I shall. My father is waiting now, dear, and you had better go."

Sir Peregrine had turned to the window, where he stood shading his eyes with his hand. When he heard his daughter-in-law's last words he again came forward, and offered Lady Mason his arm. "Edith is right," he said. "You had better go now. When you are at home you will be more composed." And then he led her forth, and down the stairs, and across the hall, and with infinite courtesy put her into the carriage. It was a moment dreadful to Lady Mason; but to Sir Peregrine, also, it was not pleasant. The servants were standing round, officiously offering their aid,—those very servants who had been told about ten days since that this lady was to become their master's wife and their mistress. They had been told so with no injunction as to secrecy, and the tidings had gone quickly through the whole country. Now it was known that the match was broken off, that the lady had been

living up stairs secluded for the last week, and that she was to leave the house this morning, having been committed during the last day or two to stand her trial at the assizes for some terrible offence! He succeeded in his task. He handed her into the carriage, and then walked back through his own servants to the library without betraying to them the depth of his sorrow; but he knew that the last task had been too heavy for him. When it was done he shut himself up and sat there for hours without moving. He also declared to himself that the world was too hard for him, and that it would be well for him that he should die. Never till now had he come into close contact with crime, and now the criminal was one whom as a woman he had learned to love, and whom he had proposed to the world as his wife! The criminal was one who had declared her crime in order to protect him, and whom therefore he was still bound in honour to protect!

When Lady Mason arrived at Orley Farm her son was waiting at the door to receive her. It should have been said that during the last two days,—that is ever since the committal,—Mrs. Orme had urged upon her very strongly that it would be well for her to tell everything to her son. “What! now, at once?” the poor woman had said. “Yes, dear at once,” Mrs. Orme had answered. “He will forgive you, for I know he is good. He will forgive you, and then the worst of your sorrow will be over.” But towards doing this Lady Mason had made no progress even in her mind. In the violence of her own resolution she had brought herself to tell her guilt to Sir Peregrine. That effort had nearly destroyed her, and now she knew that she could not frame the words which should declare the truth to Lucius. What! tell him that tale;

whereas her whole life had been spent in an effort to conceal it from him? No. She knew that she could not do it. But the idea of doing so made her tremble at the prospect of meeting him.

"I am very glad you have come home, mother," said Lucius, as he received her. "Believe me that for the present this will be the best place for both of us," and then he led her into the house.

"Dear Lucius, it would always be best for me to be with you, if it were possible."

He did not accuse her of hypocrisy in saying this; but he could not but think that had she really thought and felt as she now spoke nothing need have prevented her remaining with him. Had not his house ever been open to her? Had he not been willing to make her defence the first object of his life? Had he not longed to prove himself a good son? But she had gone from him directly that troubles came upon her, and now she said that she would fain be with him always—if it were possible! Where had been the impediment? In what way had it been not possible? He thought of this with bitterness as he followed her into the house, but he said not a word of it. He had resolved that he would be a pattern son, and even now he would not rebuke her.

She had lived in this house for some four-and-twenty years, but it seemed to her in no way like her home. Was it not the property of her enemy, Joseph Mason? and did she not know that it must go back into that enemy's hands? How then could it be to her like a home? The room in which her bed was laid was that very room in which her sin had been committed. There in the silent hours of the night, while the old man lay near his death in the adjoining chamber, had she with infinite care and much slow preparation done

that deed, to undo which, were it possible, she would now give away her existence,—ay, her very body and soul. And yet for years she had slept in that room, if not happily at least tranquilly. It was matter of wonder to her now, as she looked back at her past life, that her guilt had sat so lightly on her shoulders. The black unwelcome guest, the spectre of coming evil, had ever been present to her; but she had seen it indistinctly, and now and then the power had been hers to close her eyes. Never again could she close them. Nearer to her, and still nearer, the spectre came; and now it sat upon her pillow, and put its claw upon her plate; it pressed upon her bosom with its fiendish strength, telling her that all was over for her in this world;—ay, and telling her worse even than that. Her return to her old home brought with it but little comfort.

And yet she was forced to make an effort at seeming glad that she had come there,—a terrible effort! He, her son, was not gay or disposed to receive from her a show of happiness; but he did think that she should compose herself and be tranquil, and that she should resume the ordinary duties of her life in her ordinarily quiet way. In all this she was obliged to conform herself to his wishes,—or to attempt so to conform herself, though her heart should break in the struggle. If he did but know it all, then he would suffer her to be quiet,—suffer her to lie motionless in her misery! Once or twice she almost said to herself that she would make the effort; but then she thought of him and his suffering, of his pride, of the respect which he claimed from all the world as the honest son of an honest mother; of his stubborn will and stiff neck, which would not bend, but would break beneath the blow.

She had done all for him,—to raise him in the world; and now she could not bring herself to undo the work that had cost her so dearly!

That evening she went through the ceremony of dinner with him and he was punctilious in waiting upon her as though bread and meat could comfort her or wine could warm her heart. There was no warmth for her in all the vintages of the south, no comfort though gods should bring to her their banquets. She was heavy laden,—laden to the breaking of her back, and did not know where to lay her burden down.

“Mother,” he said to her that night, lifting his head from the books over which he had been poring, “There must be a few words between us about this affair. They might as well be spoken now.”

“Yes, Lucius; of course—if you desire it.”

“There can be no doubt now that this trial will take place.”

“No doubt,” she said. “There can be no doubt.”

“Is it your wish that I should take any part in it?”

She remained silent for some moments before she answered him, thinking,—striving to think, how best she might do him pleasure. “What part?” she said at last.

“A man’s part, and a son’s part. Shall I see these lawyers and learn from them what they are at? Have I your leave to tell them that you want no subterfuge, no legal quibbles,—that you stand firmly on your own clear innocence, and that you defy your enemies to sully it? Mother, those who have sent you to such men as that cunning attorney have sent you wrong,—have counselled you wrong.”

“It cannot be changed now, Lucius.”

“It can be changed, if you will tell me to change it.”

And then again she paused. Ah, think of her anguish as she sought for words to answer him! "No, Lucius," she said, "it cannot be changed now."

"So be it, mother; I will not ask again," and then he moodily returned to his books, while she returned to her thoughts. Ah, think of her misery!

CHAPTER XXVII

TELLING ALL THAT HAPPENED BENEATH THE LAMP-POST

WHEN Felix Graham left Noningsby and made his way up to London, he came at least to one resolution which he intended to be an abiding one. That idea of a marriage with a moulded wife should at any rate be abandoned. Whether it might be his great destiny to be the husband of Madeline Staveley, or whether he might fail in achieving this purpose, he declared to himself that it would be impossible that he should ever now become the husband of Mary Snow. And the ease with which his conscience settled itself on this matter as soon as he had received from the judge that gleam of hope astonished even himself. He immediately declared to himself that he could not marry Mary Snow without perjury! How could he stand with her before the altar and swear that he would love her, seeing that he did not love her at all,—seeing that he altogether loved some one else? He acknowledged that he had made an ass of himself in this affair of Mary Snow. This moulding of a wife had failed with him, he said, as it always must fail with every man. But he would not carry his folly further. He would go to Mary Snow, tell her the truth, and then bear whatever injury her angry father might be able to inflict

on him. Independently of that angry father he would of course do for Mary Snow all that his circumstances would admit.

Perhaps the gentleman of a poetic turn of mind whom Mary had consented to meet beneath the lamp-post might assist him in his views; but whether this might be so or not, he would not throw that meeting ungenerously in her teeth. He would not have allowed that offence to turn him from his proposed marriage had there been nothing else to turn him, and therefore he would not plead that offence as the excuse for his broken troth. That the breaking of that troth would not deeply wound poor Mary's heart—so much he did permit himself to believe on the evidence of that lamp-post.

He had written to Mrs. Thomas telling her when he would be at Peckham, but in his letter he had not said a word as to those terrible tidings which she had communicated to him. He had written also to Mary, assuring her that he accused her of no injury against him, and almost promising her forgiveness; but this letter Mary had not shown to Mrs. Thomas. In these days Mary's anger against Mrs. Thomas was very strong. That Mrs. Thomas should have used all her vigilance to detect such goings on as those of the lamp-post was only natural. What woman in Mrs. Thomas's position,—or in any other position,—would not have done so? Mary Snow knew that had she herself been the duenna she would have left no corner of a box unturned but she would have found those letters. And having found them she would have used her power over the poor girl. She knew that. But she would not have betrayed her to the man. Truth between woman and woman should have prevented

that. Were not the stockings which she had darned for Mrs. Thomas legion in number? Had she not consented to eat the veriest scraps of food in order that those three brats might be fed into sleekiness to satisfy their mother's eyes? Had she not reported well of Mrs. Thomas to her lord, though that house of Peckham was nauseous to her? Had she ever told to Mr. Graham any one of those little tricks which were carried on to allure him into a belief that things at Peckham were prosperous? Had she ever exposed the borrowing of those teacups when he came, and the fact that those knobs of white sugar were kept expressly on his behoof? No; she would have scorned to betray any woman; and that woman whom she had not betrayed should have shown the same feeling towards her. Therefore there was enmity at Peckham, and the stockings of those infants lay unmended in the basket.

"Mary, I have done it all for the best," said Mrs. Thomas, driven to defend herself by the obdurate silence of her pupil.

"No, Mrs. Thomas, you didn't. You did it for the worst," said Mary. And then there was again silence between them.'

It was on the morning following this that Felix Graham was driven to the door in a cab. He still carried his arm in a sling, and was obliged to be somewhat slow in his movements, but otherwise he was again well. His accident however was so far a god-send to both the women at Peckham that it gave them a subject on which they were called upon to speak, before that other subject was introduced. Mary was very tender in her inquiries,—but tender in a bashful retiring way. To look at her one would have said that

she was afraid to touch the wounded man lest he should be again broken.

"Oh, I'm all right," said he, trying to assume a look of good-humour. "I sha'n't go hunting again in a hurry; you may be sure of that."

"We have all great reason to be thankful that Providence interposed to save you," said Mrs. Thomas, in her most serious tone. Had Providence interposed to break Mrs. Thomas's collar-bone, or at least to do her some serious outward injury, what a comfort it would be, thought Mary Snow.

"Have you seen your father lately?" asked Graham.

"Not since I wrote to you about the money that he—borrowed," said Mary.

"I told her that she should not have given it to him," said Mrs. Thomas.

"She was quite right," said Graham. "Who could refuse assistance to a father in distress?" Whereupon Mary put her handkerchief up to her eyes and began to cry.

"That's true of course," said Mrs. Thomas; "but it would never do that he should be a drain in that way. He should feel that if he had any feeling."

"So he has," said Mary. "And you are driven close enough yourself sometimes, Mrs. Thomas. There's days when you'd like to borrow nineteen and sixpence if anybody would lend it you."

"Very well," said Mrs. Thomas, crossing her hands over each other in her lap and assuming a look of resignation; "I suppose all this will be changed now. I have endeavoured to do my duty, and very hard it has been."

Felix felt that the sooner he rushed into the middle of the subject which brought him there, the better it

would be for all parties. That the two ladies were not very happy together was evident, and then he made a little comparison between Madeline and Mary. Was it really the case that for the last three years he had contemplated making that poor child his wife? Would it not be better for him to tie a millstone round his neck and cast himself into the sea? That was now his thought respecting Mary Snow.

"Mrs. Thomas," he said, "I should like to speak to Mary alone for a few minutes if you could allow it."

"Oh certainly; by all means. It will be quite proper." And gathering up a bundle of the unfortunate stockings she took herself out of the room.

Mary, as soon as Graham had spoken, became almost pale, and sat perfectly still with her eyes fixed on her betrothed husband. While Mrs. Thomas was there she was prepared for war and her spirit was hot within her, but all that heat fled in a moment when she found herself alone with the man to whom it belonged to speak her doom. He had almost said that he would forgive her, but yet she had a feeling that that had been done which could not altogether be forgiven. If he asked her whether she loved the hero of the lamp-post what would she say? Had he asked her whether she loved him, Felix Graham, she would have sworn that she did, and have thought that she was swearing truly; but in answer to that other question if it were asked, she felt that her answer must be false. She had no idea of giving up Felix of her own accord, if he were still willing to take her. She did not even wish that he would not take her. It had been the lesson of her life that she was to be his wife, and, by becoming so, provide for herself and for her wretched father. Nevertheless a dream of something different from that

had come across her young heart, and the dream had been so pleasant! How painfully, but yet with what a rapture, had her heart palpitated as she stood for those ten wicked minutes beneath the lamp-post!

"Mary," said Felix, as soon as they were alone,—and as he spoke he came up to her and took her hand, "I trust I may never be the cause to you of any unhappiness;—that I may never be the means of making you sad."

"Oh, Mr. Graham, I am sure that you never will. It is I that have been bad to you."

"No, Mary, I do not think you have been bad at all. I should have been sorry that that had happened, and that I should not have known it."

"I suppose she was right to tell, only——" In truth Mary did not at all understand what might be the nature of Graham's thoughts and feelings on such a subject. She had a strong woman's idea that the man whom she ought to love would not be gratified by her meeting another man at a private assignation especially when that other man had written to her a love-letter; but she did not at all know how far such a sin might be regarded as pardonable according to the rules of the world recognised on such subjects. At first, when the letters were discovered and the copies of them sent off to Noningsby, she thought that all was over. According to her ideas, as existing at that moment, the crime was conceived to be one admitting of no pardon; and in the hours spent under that conviction all her consolation came from the feeling that there was still one who regarded her as an angel of light. But then she had received Graham's letter, and as she began to understand that pardon was possible, that other consolation waxed feeble and dim. If Felix Graham chose

to take her, of course she was there for him to take. It never for a moment occurred to her that she could rebel against such taking, even though she did shine as an angel of light to one dear pair of eyes.

"I suppose she was right to tell you, only——"

"Do not think, Mary, that I am going to scold you, or even that I am angry with you."

"Oh, but I know you must be angry."

"Indeed I am not. If I pledge myself to tell you the truth in everything, will you be equally frank with me?"

"Yes," said Mary. But it was much easier for Felix to tell the truth than for Mary to be frank. I believe that schoolmasters often tell fibs to schoolboys, although it would be so easy for them to tell the truth. But how difficult it is for the schoolboy always to tell the truth to his master! Mary Snow was now as a schoolboy before her tutor, and it may almost be said that the telling of the truth was to her impossible. But of course she made the promise. Who ever said that she would not tell the truth when so asked?

"Have you ever thought, Mary, that you and I would not make each other happy if we were married?"

"No; I have never thought that," said Mary innocently. She meant to say exactly that which she thought Graham would wish her to say, but she was slow in following his lead.

"It has never occurred to you that though we might love each other very warmly as friends—and so I am sure we always shall—yet we might not suit each other in all respects as man and wife?"

"I mean to do the very best I can; that is, if—if—if you are not too much offended with me now."

"But, Mary, it should not be a question of doing the best you can. Between man and wife there should be no need of such effort. It should be a labour of love."

"So it will;—and I'm sure I'll labour as hard as I can."

Felix began to perceive that the line he had taken would not answer the required purpose, and that he must be somewhat more abrupt with her,—perhaps a little less delicate, in coming to the desired point. "Mary," he said, "what is the name of that gentleman whom—whom you met out of doors, you know?"

"Albert Fitzallen," said Mary, hesitating very much as she pronounced the name, but nevertheless rather proud of the sound.

"And you are—fond of him?" asked Graham.

Poor girl! What was she to say? "No; I'm not very fond of him."

"Are you not? Then why did you consent to that secret meeting?"

"Oh, Mr. Graham—I didn't mean it; indeed I didn't. And I didn't tell him to write to me, nor yet to come looking after me. Upon my word I didn't. But then I thought when he sent me that letter that he didn't know;—about you I mean;—and so I thought I'd better tell him; and that's why I went. Indeed that was the reason."

"Mrs. Thomas could have told him that."

"But I don't like Mrs. Thomas, and I wouldn't for worlds that she should have had anything to do with it. I think Mrs. Thomas has behaved very bad to me; so I do. And you don't half know her;—that you don't."

"I will ask you one more question, Mary, and before answering it I want to make you believe that my only object in asking it is to ascertain how I may make you happy. When you did meet Mr.—this gentleman——"

"Albert Fitzallen."

"When you did meet Mr. Fitzallen, did you tell him nothing else except that you were engaged to me? Did you say nothing to him as to your feelings towards himself?"

"I told him it was very wrong of him to write me that letter."

"And what more did you tell him?"

"Oh, Mr. Graham, I won't see him any more; indeed I won't. I give you my most solemn promise. Indeed I won't. And I will never write a line to him,—or look at him. And if he sends anything I'll send it to you. Indeed I will. There was never anything of the kind before; upon my word there wasn't. I did let him take my hand, but I didn't know how to help it when I was there. And he kissed me—only once. There; I've told it all now, as though you were looking at me. And I ain't a bad girl, whatever she may say of me. Indeed I ain't." And then poor Mary Snow burst out into an agony of tears.

Felix began to perceive that he had been too hard upon her. He had wished that the first overtures of a separation should come from her, and in wishing this he had been unreasonable. He walked for a while about the room, and then going up to her he stood close by her and took her hand. "Mary," he said, "I'm sure you're not a bad girl."

"No;" she said, "no, I ain't;" still sobbing convulsively. "I didn't mean anything wrong, and I couldn't help it."

"I am sure you did not, and nobody has said you did."

"Yes, they have. She has said so. She said that I was a bad girl. She told me so, up to my face."

"She was very wrong if she said so."

"She did then, and I couldn't bear it."

"I have not said so, and I don't think so. Indeed in all this matter I believe that I have been more to blame than you."

"No;—I know I was wrong. I know I shouldn't have gone to see him."

"I won't even say as much as that, Mary. What you should have done—only the task would have been too hard for any young girl—was to have told me openly that you—liked this young gentleman."

"But I don't want ever to see him again."

"Look here, Mary," he said. But now he had dropped her hand and taken a chair opposite to her. He had begun to find that the task which he had proposed to himself was not so easy even for him. "Look here, Mary. I take it that you do like this young gentleman. Don't answer me till I have finished what I am going to say. I suppose you do like him,—and if so it would be very wicked in you to marry me."

"Oh, Mr. Graham——"

"Wait a moment, Mary. But there is nothing wicked in your liking him." It may be presumed that Mr. Graham would hold such an opinion as this, seeing that he had allowed himself the same latitude of liking. "It was perhaps only natural that you should learn to do so. You have been taught to regard me rather as a master than as a lover."

"Oh, Mr. Graham, I'm sure I've loved you. I have indeed. And I will. I won't even think of Al——"

"But I want you to think of him,—that is if he be worth thinking of."

"He's a very good young man, and always lives with his mother."

"It shall be my business to find out that. And now, Mary, tell me truly. If he be a good young man, and if he loves you well enough to marry you, would you not be happier as his wife than you would as mine?"

There! The question that he wished to ask her had got itself asked at last. But if the asking had been difficult, how much more difficult must have been the answer! He had been thinking over all this for the last fortnight, and had hardly known how to come to a resolution. Now he put the matter before her without a moment's notice and expected an instant decision. "Speak the truth, Mary;—what you think about it;—without minding what anybody may say of you." But Mary could not say anything, so she again burst into tears.

"Surely you know the state of your own heart, Mary?"

"I don't know," she answered.

"My only object is to secure your happiness;—the happiness of both of us, that is."

"I'll do anything you please," said Mary.

"Well, then, I'll tell you what I think. I fear that a marriage between us would not make either of us contented with our lives. I'm too old and too grave for you." Yet Mary Snow was not younger than Madeline Staveley. "You have been told to love me, and you think that you do love me because you wish to do what you think to be your duty. But I believe that people can never really love each other merely because

they are told to do so. Of course I cannot say what sort of a young man Mr. Fitzallen may be; but if I find that he is fit to take care of you, and that he has means to support you,—with such little help as I can give,—I shall be very happy to promote such an arrangement.”

Everybody will of course say that Felix Graham was base in not telling her that all this arose, not from her love affair with Albert Fitzallen, but from his own love affair with Madeline Staveley. But I am inclined to think that everybody will be wrong. Had he told her openly that he did not care for her, but did care for some one else, he would have left her no alternative. As it was, he did not mean that she should have any alternative. But he probably consulted her feelings best in allowing her to think that she had a choice. And then, though he owed much to her, he owed nothing to her father; and had he openly declared his intention of breaking off the match because he had attached himself to some one else, he would have put himself terribly into her father's power. He was willing to submit to such pecuniary burden in the matter as his conscience told him that he ought to bear; but Mr. Snow's ideas on the subject of recompense might be extravagant; and therefore,—as regarded Snow the father,—he thought that he might make some slight and delicate use of the meeting under the lamp-post. In doing so he would be very careful to guard Mary from her father's anger. Indeed Mary would be surrendered, out of his own care, not to that of her father, but to the fostering love of the gentleman in the medical line of life.

“I'll do anything that you please,” said Mary, upon whose mind and heart all these changes had come with

a suddenness which prevented her from thinking,—much less speaking her thoughts.

“Perhaps you had better mention it to Mrs. Thomas.”

“Oh, Mr. Graham, I’d rather not talk to her. I don’t love her a bit.”

“Well, I will not press it on you if you do not wish it. And have I your permission to speak to Mr. Fitzallen;—and if he approves to speak to his mother?”

“I’ll do anything you think best, Mr. Graham,” said poor Mary. She was poor Mary; for though she had consented to meet a lover beneath the lamp-post, she had not been without ambition, and had looked forward to the glory of being wife to such a man as Felix Graham. She did not, however, for one moment entertain any idea of resistance to his will.

And then Felix left her, having of course an interview with Mrs. Thomas before he quitted the house. To her, however, he said nothing. “When anything is settled, Mrs. Thomas, I will let you know.” The words were so lacking in confidence that Mrs. Thomas when she heard them knew that the verdict had gone against her.

Felix for many months had been accustomed to take leave of Mary Snow with a kiss. But on this day he omitted to kiss her, and then Mary knew that it was all over with her ambition. But love still remained to her. “There is some one else who will be proud to kiss me,” she said to herself, as she stood alone in the room when he closed the door behind him.

